



# Communication In a Nigerian Language: A Path to National Development

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## Abstract

This paper explores the role of communication in a Nigeria Language as a vital tool for achieving national development. A nation that loses its indigenous language, loses its culture, and a nation that loses its culture is dead. Language is a national identity through which national values and norms are transmitted. Communication in a given Nigeria Language thus express Nigeria's value and norms, as well as sustaining her national identity and development. This paper, therefore, argues that communication in a given Nigeria Language has the potential to foster a sense of national identity promote cultural values, and drive development.

**Keywords:** *Communication, Nigeria Language, National Development, Cultural Identity, Greatness.*

## 1. Introduction

According to Ebe (2003), an indigenous language is inherent to a particular community. Nwadike (2002) emphasizes the irreplaceable value of these languages, viewing their loss as a loss of cultural identity. In Nigeria, this concept applies directly to Nigerian indigenous languages. For individuals, fluency in their mother tongue the language of their childhood, family, and community is essential for personal growth, providing a medium for expressing thoughts and emotions throughout life. (Ebe, 2003).

Proficiency in one's indigenous language fosters effective participation in society. This language transmits and embodies the culture, providing a complete understanding of the societal context (Ebe, 2003). Consequently, individuals learn and live their culture through the effective use of their indigenous language. Those lacking proficiency miss out significantly on the traditional and informal education their society provides. To this end, this paper is presented under the following points viz;

- a. Nigerian language versus religious cultural values
- b. Nigerian language versus social cultural values
- c. Nigerian language and education
- d. Nigerian language as a tool for national unity and strength.



#### **a. Nigerian language versus cultural and religious values**

Nigeria, with its rich tapestry of over 500 languages presents a complex linguistic landscape that interacts with various aspects of the society, culture and education. The interplay between Nigerian languages, cultural and religious values is multifaceted and sometimes contentious. Indigenous languages are crucial for preserving traditional Nigerian religious practices and cultural norms, embodying local cosmologies, proverbs, and rituals central to national identity. However, colonial history and global religions have created a complex linguistic landscape.

For example, Arabic's importance in northern Nigeria stems from its association with Islam, while English often links to Christianity elsewhere (Adegbija, 2021). Language choice in religious contexts reflects cultural identity; using indigenous languages in religious practice helps preserve local cultures and enhances religious understanding. (Ogunmodimu, 2023)

#### **b. Nigerian language versus social values**

A healthy society effectively transmits its social values to its citizens, and language, particularly indigenous languages, plays a vital role in this process in Nigeria (Adegbija, 2021). Nigerian society is rich in diverse social values expressed across various contexts and times. Religious and cultural practices including burials, naming ceremonies, and chieftaincy installations all embody specific values. Indigenous languages are essential for maintaining social cohesion and expressing culturally specific norms within ethnic groups, fostering a sense of belonging and identity difficult to achieve through other languages. This strong connection often leads to code-switching.

Nigerian social ceremonies frequently incorporate songs in indigenous languages, reflecting different aspects of community life. There are songs meant for social interaction such as in wedding and marriages, in announcing the passing away of the loved ones, burials, advertisement and so on. Songs are also used for worship and ritual performance eg; songs used in churches for praising and worshipping God, and those used by ritualist and priests when they conduct their worships and ritual performance. These songs are very good in transmitting ideas and concerts that are indigenous in Nigeria, and if handled properly, they serve as very good instruments of training in oracy (Awoniyi, 2014).

Indigenous languages play a vital role in expressing Nigerian cultural traditions, particularly in traditional performances and ceremonies. For example, during masquerade festivals in Igbo communities, the Igbo language is the primary means of communication - masquerades communicate with their followers and initiated members exclusively in their native tongue. This reflects a broader pattern where most aspects of Nigeria's traditional social customs and practices are conducted and passed down through indigenous languages.

#### **c. Nigerian language versus Education**

Attempts to promote national languages viz-a-viz Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba have not succeeded. In Nigeria's multilingual environment, each of these three major language groups actively competes to make their language the most widespread and accepted across the country. This competition extends into education, where each group pushes for their language to be taught in schools to preserve their cultural values among young people. For instance, Hausa is used to teach



in Northern Koranic schools, while Igbo is taught as a first language in Eastern schools, and Yoruba serves a similar role in its region.

Since language is a means of promoting social interaction, and national cohesion, stability and unity and since it is a very good means of preserving the people's culture, it is necessary that every Nigerian child learns the language of his/her immediate environment, much as that language could be the child's mother tongue.

#### **d. The use of indigenous language as a means of achieving unity and strength.**

Nigeria's linguistic diversity presents a double-edged sword for national unity. The multitude of languages, while potentially divisive, also constitutes a rich cultural asset that can strengthen the nation. The idea of "unity in diversity" is central to Nigerian language policy, acknowledging the potential for linguistic diversity to foster national pride and cultural richness (Emenanjo, 2022).

#### **1.1. The relationship between the discussed language issues and Nigeria's national development and greatness viz**

2. **Economic development:** Nigeria's multiple languages are a valuable asset. People who speak Nigerian languages alongside English have better business opportunities, particularly in regional trade. A good example is how Hausa speakers have an advantage in cross-border Saharan commerce. Yet there's a challenge: the widespread use of English in formal business can exclude those who aren't fluent, potentially limiting some people's ability to participate fully in the economy and contribute their innovative ideas. However, the dominance of English in formal business settings sometimes creates barriers for those not fluent in it; potentially limiting economic participation and innovation from certain segments of society (Adegbija, 2021).
3. **Educational advancement:** Language choices deeply affect education, which in turn shapes national development. Studies show that children learn better when taught in their native language, especially during their early years. If Nigeria were to make greater use of local languages in schools, it could see several benefits: better literacy levels, reduce dropout rates, and higher overall educational achievement. These improvements could create a more capable workforce that drives both innovation and economic progress. (Bamigbose, 2020).
4. **Cultural Preservation and soft Power:** Nigeria's linguistic and cultural diversity is a source of soft Power on the global stage. The country's music, literature and films produced in Nigerian languages have gained international recognition. This cultural export not only generates revenue but also enhances Nigeria's global influence. Preserving and promoting Nigerian languages thus contribute to the country's cultural capital and international standard (Emenanjo, 2022).
5. **National unity and political stability:** Language policies that respect and promote linguistic diversity while fostering a sense of national identity can contribute to political stability. By recognizing major Nigerian languages alongside English, the government can promote inclusivity and reduce feelings of marginalization among different ethnic groups. This linguistic inclusivity can strengthen national unity, a crucial factor for Nigeria's development and greatness (Ogunmodimu, 2020).
6. **Indigenous knowledge and sustainable development:** Nigerian languages are repositories of indigenous knowledge, including traditional agricultural practices, herbal



medicine, and environmental management techniques preserving these languages helps maintain access to this knowledge, which can contribute to sustainable development, for example, traditional farming methods preserved through indigenous languages could inform climate resilient agricultural strategies (Oyetade, 2022).

7. **Health communication:** In healthcare using local languages is vital for public health success. When health information and medical consultations are available in Nigerian languages, especially in rural areas where English is less common, it leads to better health outcomes. (Bamigbose, 2020).
8. **Social Cohesion and identity:** Language deeply influences how people view themselves and their community. Supporting Nigerian languages helps build a national identity that celebrates the country's rich cultural diversity. This creates stronger social bonds and a unified sense of purpose, which are essential for national progress.

Indigenous languages are essential tools for both education and preserving culture, which are fundamental to reaching Nigeria's national goals. Nigeria strives to build a society founded on freedom, justice, democracy, and equality - one where all citizens have opportunities to thrive and contribute to a robust, independent economy. By incorporating indigenous languages into education, we can better transmit vital cultural values and shape positive attitudes that serve both individual and national interests. These languages help develop crucial life skills and capabilities that allow citizens to actively participate in community development. Embracing cultural expression through indigenous languages is key to Nigeria's growth and unification, ultimately strengthening the nation as a whole.

### 1.1.1. The National Language Question

Nigeria faces a complex set of challenges known as 'the national question.' This encompasses political, economic, and linguistic issues. One particularly important aspect is the language policy debate, which has both linguistic and political dimensions. The key issue at stake is: Given Nigeria's diverse linguistic and ethnic makeup, which language should serve as the country's official language for both domestic and international communication?

Language selection is straightforward when only one language is involved. With two languages, choosing between them is relatively simple. However, the selection process becomes much more complicated in multilingual environments where three or more languages are available to choose from.

### 1.1.2. The Contender

By contenders we are referring to the linguistic candidates (that is, languages) jostling for the national language seat. Nigeria has numerous languages, including English and various dialects. There are two main schools of thought regarding the national language: those who advocate for choosing one of Nigeria's languages (either major or minor), and those who prefer a non-indigenous language.

While any of these languages could technically serve as the national language, certain linguistic and socio-political factors make some languages more suitable candidates than others. Various proposals have been put forward to address this national language question



## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Answer to the National Language Question**

Here are the review of the various proposals put forward in respect of the national language question. These proposals are treated as options or alternative solutions to the national language problem.

### **2.2. Indigenous Language Alternative**

The supporters of external language alternative, have put forward English as a very strong and eminently qualified candidate for the position of a national language. In the belief of this group of people, the choice of English language has some advantages viz:

- a. English has a rich lexicon and developed grammar
- b. English is a world language; it is a language of international or wider communication.
- c. English is the language of modernism, science and technology.
- d. It is, to a large extent, Nigeria's lingua franca.
- e. It is essentially a neutral language since no linguistic group or community in Nigeria can claim it as its own native language.

#### **2.2.1. This option has the following problems:**

- a. Only few Nigerians speak or write English language
- b. It is not a native language in Nigeria
- c. It is regarded as the language of the educated people or the elites.

#### **2.2.2. Artificial Language Alternative**

Some people have also advocated the choice of an artificial language. Such efforts have produced 'WAZOBIA' and Alex Igbineweka's 'GUOSA'. These projects were short lived for lack of certain factors. As Elugbe (1990:11) puts it;

“The serious business of national languages and development must not be stalled by such unproductive proposals as Wazobia and Guosa.”

### **2.3. Pidgin English Alternative**

Pidgin English is another proposal put forward as solution to the national language question. Pidgin English is partly English and partly dependent on the structure of indigenous languages. The belief by this group is that pidgin English will be simple to learn and that it is, to some extent, neutral.

The following problems are inherent in this proposal:



- a. Pidgin English is yet to have a definite structure
- b. Pidgin is yet to be given formal grammar
- c. Only few Nigerians speak pidgin English.

## **2.4. Nigerian English Alternative**

Nigerian English is yet another proposal Nigerian English has been conceived as a legitimate Nigerian brand or variety of the global English. It is hoped that this will eventually lead to the standardization of the language. This proposal is considered as a good alternative because Nigerian English is also neutral and also exhibits a structure that truly reflects the sociocultural and political experience in Nigerians.

## **2.5. Pedagogic Implications**

Language plays a vital role in promoting social bonds, national unity, and cultural preservation. Therefore, every Nigerian child should learn the local language of their community, which may be their mother tongue. Additionally, to promote mutual understanding among Nigerians, each child should learn at least one of the three major Nigerian languages (Igbo, Hausa, or Yoruba) besides their native language. This approach will help create unity while respecting Nigeria's diverse linguistic heritage.

## **3. Conclusion**

In a developing nation like ours, language is vital tool for gaining self-reliance. This is particularly effective since it inculcates in its users, all the norms and values of the host society. Therefore, the regular use of our respective indigenous languages within and outside the school system, should be emphasized if Nigeria is to attain national development. This paper therefore concludes that every Nigerian language is eligible to be designated as national language, and that English language, though an external language, is also qualified because of certain merits and they are in complimentary distribution in the task of national building. Finally, Nigerians should pay attention to the issue of national language in Nigeria and the masses should be sensitized on the gains of having a national language.

### **3.1. Recommendations**

To address the challenges and harness the potential of Nigerian languages to achieving national development, several recommendations have been made viz:

1. To create and execute all-encompassing policies for multilingual education that honour both English and native tongues.
2. To make investments in the creation of excellent educational resources for primary and early childhood education.
3. To assist with language documentation and revitalization initiatives, particularly for minority languages at risk of extinction.
4. To promote Nigerian languages in media, literature and public spaces to enhance their prestige and utility.





5. To incorporate indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices into formal education curricular.
6. That more teachers should be trained on these languages from time to time. Periodically, refresher training should be offered to them as well.
7. To provide incentives for teachers proficient in Nigerian languages and invest in teachers training programs that emphasize multi lingual education.
8. To encourage research on effective pedagogical approaches for multi-lingual contexts in Nigeria.
9. To establish collaborations among educational institutions, linguistic communities, and IT firms to develop digital resources for Nigerian languages.
10. That our attitude towards our indigenous languages should change from that of apathy to that of love for those languages.

By tackling these areas, Nigeria may strive towards a more inclusive, and effective educational system that values linguistic diversity and fosters national growth, unity, and grandeur.

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