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# Consequences of Marginalised Nigerian Indigenous Languages

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## Abstract

The reality that many of the indigenous languages in Nigeria seem to be on their way to extinction is real and of great concern to many. Most of the minor indigenous languages in Nigeria have been undermined and robbed of their importance as a result of the continued domination of English, the official language of Nigeria. This study investigates the multifaceted consequences of marginalised Nigerian indigenous languages within the Nigerian socio-cultural context. Utilizing a quantitative approach with the use of SPSS data analysis, with Postcolonial theory as theoretical framework, data was collected through surveys distributed across diverse regions of Nigeria. The findings reveal a myriad of detrimental effects resulting from the marginalization of indigenous languages, including the erosion of cultural identity, limited access to education and economic opportunities, and the exacerbation of social inequalities. Furthermore, the study identifies the intricate interplay between language policies, societal attitudes, and historical legacies in perpetuating language marginalization. The implications of these findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive language revitalization efforts and

policy reforms to promote linguistic diversity, preserve cultural heritage, and foster inclusive development in Nigeria.
Keywords: Indigenous languages, marginalization, language endangerment, linguicide, colonialism.

## Introduction

A significant proportion of communities in the world today are confronted with the endangerment of their indigenous languages, which have traditionally been an integral feature of their identity. Though these languages have been firmly planted in particular geography before the European colonialization, they are now at the risk of becoming extinct. According to Grenoble and Whaley (2006), the numbers of endangered languages that we have in the world are "growing and has become an issue of global proportion. There are now hundreds of endangered languages, and there are few regions of the world where one will not find at least nascent attempts at language revitalization." Still on this, they further opined that "there is a consensus that at least half of world's 6,000–7,000 languages will disappear (or be on the verge of disappearing) in the next century".

Nigeria is a multilingual country that has a large linguistic diversity. There are over 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria with over 500 indigenous languages, of which some such as Ebira and Echie, are not yet in print and are already in extinction since they are not documented and digitalised, two actions which could have led to the preservation of such languages. According to the Vanguard newspaper (2014), "up to 400 minority Nigerian languages are considered endangered, with 152 of them at risk of extinction". It should be noted that it is not only the minority indigenous languages that are endangered. Though Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo are major languages that dominate, studies have shown that they could also be in danger of attrition.

Just as there is a fear of marginalization of the minority languages by the major languages, we also have the marginalization of the major languages by the English language, a foreign language which though seems to serve as the lingua franca in Nigeria, is now being seen as more superior to the indigenous languages. It does not also help matters that the younger generation of the indigenous language speakers speak less of their native languages. If proper action is not taken to prevent the marginalization of these languages, there would be dire consequences.

**Purpose of the Study**

The plight of indigenous languages in Nigeria has long been a subject of great interest among many authors as it is obvious that English, a foreign language that was integrated into the languages in Nigeria during the annexation and domination of the country by the imperial lords has been elevated over the indigenous languages. With a close scrutiny at the Yoruba and Igbo indigenous languages, this study hopes to discover:

1. The reason for the marginalization of the indigenous languages in Nigeria by Nigerians
2. The generation who will be most affected by linguicide
3. Why endangered languages should be revitalised.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used for this research is the Postcolonial theory. It is a critical framework which examines the social, cultural effects of colonialism and imperialism on individuals, communities and nations. In postcolonial theory, there is a focus on the power dynamics involved in the colonial encounter and cultural implications of colonialism and the impact of colonialism and subjectivities (Said, 1978). In many postcolonial societies, traditional cultural values and norms have been challenged by western ideas and attitudes towards sexuality, including perceptions of language death. Postcolonial theory is important in the examination of the after-effects of the discourses

of colonialization, how the legacies of colonialism and imported western ideologies such as the use of the English language in all sectors have affected the formation of individuals in the colonised territories.

**Language attitude of Yoruba and Igbo people**

Many Nigerians now have a lackadaisical attitude towards speaking their indigenous languages. In line with that, some studies have shown that some Igbo and Yoruba parents living both in Nigeria and in diaspora do prefer their children speaking English to Igbo and Yoruba. This is because apart from the fact that English is globally recognised as the language of the media, discussion during meetings, and even in different institutions, it is the language of education, trade, and government administration in Nigeria. As a result of that, people who mostly speak their native languages or study them in universities are often mocked as being backward.

In the bid to flaunt their mastery of the English language, many have developed a cold attitude towards speaking their indigenous languages, and if care is not taken, it could lead to the death of the languages. In line with this, Ager (2009) notes that major indigenous languages in Nigeria are under threat of extinction, no thanks to how most parents speak English in their homes and how their children, especially the ones that go to schools with British curriculum are prevented from speaking their indigenous languages in the school. In line with this, Ogunsanya (2007) notes that those using the English language as the L1 in their homes have simply found the shortcut to kill their indigenous languages because if an adult does not acquire a language at a young age, there is a likelihood that he or she would never be able to speak the language the same way with someone who is a native speaker of a language and was raised speaking it.

Though speaking the English language has some advantages, relegating one's mother tongue for this foreign language is preposterous as it is not expected of a serious nation or individual to delegate its indigenous languages for a foreign one. Currently, some younger generation can't pronounce their indigenous names correctly, and it is now a big deal, asking them to speak their local dialect. Although it is stipulated by the government of Nigeria that the indigenous languages of each community should be the language of instruction in the primary schools and curriculum subject in secondary schools, we still have a poor attitude of native speakers towards their mother tongue as some students are being penalised in their classes for speaking "vernacular" as against the English language which is more globally recognised.

The attitude of the government towards retaining our indigenous languages is not positive. For example, even though the Constitution of Nigeria prescribes in section 55 that the business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in both English and the major indigenous languages, it is still not obtainable in the National Assembly.

**The Cultural Dichotomy of Traditional and Western Cultures in Nigeria**

In the post-colonial Nigeria, there is a cultural dichotomy of traditional and western cultures which is a cause of confusion for someone tied to more than one culture/language. Many young Nigerians can relate to the distraction caused by the subject of culture conflict. A perfect example of this can be gotten from the first and third stanzas of Gabriel Okpara's Piano and Drums which reveals from the musical perspective, the desecration of the African way of life and the confused state most Nigerians are in now. They are thus,

When at break of day at a riverside
I hear the jungle drums telegraphing

The mystic rhythm, urgent, raw
Like bleeding flesh, speaking of
Primal youth and the beginning
I see the panther ready to pounce
The leopard snarling about to leap
And the hunters crouch with spears poised;

Then I hear a wailing piano
Solo speaking of complex ways in
Tear-furrowed concerto;
Of faraway lands
And new horizons with coaxing diminuendo, counterpoint,
Crescendo. But lost in the labyrinth
Of its complexities, it ends in the middle
Of a phrase at a dagger point.

The fourth stanza shows the state of confounding double consciousness which most educated Nigerians find themselves in, and their struggles to cope with the cultural conflict. It goes thus,

And I lost in the morning mist
Of an age at a riverside keep
Wandering in the mystic rhythm
Of jungle drums and the concerto.

This shows the crisis of identity that confronts Nigerians and other Africans as a result of the autochthonous clashes with the imported. It should be noted that in the instance where there is a clash in cultures, there are so many things that can happen. Either the foreign language or the indigenous one could be ignored or a part of the indigenous culture could be dying while the foreign one is being assimilated. The next section will reveal the concept of linguicide, and the next, the degree to the endangerment of Nigerians indigenous languages.

## The Concept of Linguicide

Linguicide is a situation that occurs when a particular speech community ceases to use their Indigenous language. It is a concept that simply means language death. The commonest process which leads to the death of a language is one where people in a speech community become bilingual in another language and due to some reasons, radically or gradually shift to the second language till they elevate the latter and stop using their indigenous language. This is the situation with the Yoruba and Igbo languages. As a result of the whites' colonial domination, there was the introduction of the English language which has led to the marginalization of not only the cultures and traditions of local people but also their languages. In line with that, Usman (2014) asserts that the imperial powers "assert their imperial, political, or economic weight on minority languages, promoting their languages at the expenses of these, thereby paving the way for language displacement".

## The Six Degrees of Language Endangerment

The UNESCO experts identified six degrees of language endangerment which Usman (2014) cited in his work. They include:

1. Safe: This is an instance where there is intergenerational transmission of a language. Both the adults and children in that community speak it fluently.
2. Vulnerable (Unsafe): Here, though adults and children speak their indigenous languages, there would be a restriction (the languages are restricted to being spoken in the home and not a formal environment).
3. Endangered: Here, the languages are only spoken by the older generation and children no longer learn the language.
4. Severely endangered: While the parents might understand their indigenous languages, they are only being spoken by the grandparents. In this instance, the parents won't be able to pass their indigenous languages to their children.

5. Critically endangered: We have the youngest speakers of the indigenous languages as grandparents. They seldomly speak the language and when they do, it is partially.
6. Extinct: By this period, the language will be extinct because there will be no one speaking the language.

**Linguicide/Attrition**

Grenoble and Whaley in their book, *Saving Languages: An Introduction to Language Revitalization (2006),* explained the different types of language death which are obtainable in different cultures. They will be buttressed below:

1. **Sudden Language Death**

According to them, this attrition, "occurs when a language is abruptly lost due to the sudden loss of its speakers as the result of disease, warfare, natural catastrophe, and so on. Though few cases of sudden attrition hae been well documented, it likely occurred with some frequency during colonization, when people are known to have been decimated due to disease. The presence of civil strife and ethnic clashes in the modern world continues to raise the possibility of sudden attrition, as does the spread of AID." They further went on to say that, "revitalization is much more difficult – if not impossible – in instances of sudden attrition, for example, than it is in gradual attrition, which at least has the potential of being arrested".

Thus, in sudden language death, all, or almost all the speakers of a language die due to violence or the result of a disaster. An example was the Black War which took place in Tasmania in the 1830s. During this period, all the island natives were wiped out by the European colonists.

2. **Radical Language Death**

Radical language death occurs very rapidly due to the threat of violence or political repression. Here, the natives don't die, they

just suddenly stop using their language. An example was the uprising that happened in El Salvador when many native speakers (Aboriginals stopped speaking their language, so it won't identify them as native speakers and lead to their death.

Another example is the Ajawa language in Bauchi state which saw the native speakers quickly switch from Ajawa language to Hausa for practical and economic reasons between 1920 and 1940. They stopped using their native language very rapidly and also did not pass it down to their generation.

Grenoble and Whaley assert that this is, "similar to sudden attrition in that it comes from a set of political circumstances which lead to speakers ceasing to use their language due to repression and/or genocide. It is a means of self-defence: speakers wish not to be identified with their ethnic group to avoid persecution and, accordingly, rapidly cease speaking their heritage language".

3. **Gradual Language Death**

Gradual death of a language occurs when speakers of a language come into contact with another language of higher prestige (of more dominant and powerful people). When this happens and every generation continues to use the prestige language, one day, it would be discovered that the communities' traditional language wills no more be spoken. Note that the language dies more in formal contexts. An example of this language is Fulfulde which is gradually dying as most native speakers have placed a higher prestige on the Hausa language and speak Hausa more.

The sociolinguistics experts, ascribe this attrition "to the relatively slow loss of a language due to language shift away from the local language to a language of wider communication, whether that be a regionally dominant language or a national lingua franca".

In gradual language death, because the attrition is gradual and not much noticeable, people might not realise their indigenous language is dying, until it has gotten to the point where it is endangered and revitalization becomes quite difficult.

4. **Bottom-to-Top Language Death**

According to Grenoble and Whaley, "this has also been called the latinate pattern, where the language is lost in the family setting and most other domains yet are used widely in religious or ritual practices." This shows that a language ceases to be used as a spoken language but can continue to be used normally in a literary ceremony or formal context. A very popular example is Latin which is used in the Catholic Church to date.

The kind of language death that mostly occurs in Nigeria is gradual language death. Nigerians, as a result of their contact with the English language, see it as a prestigious language and are gradually shifting from speaking their indigenous languages to concentrating fully on English.

**Languages that Are Already Dead in Nigeria**

According to the language endangerment status by UNESCO, several indigenous languages in Nigeria are already dead. Some of these languages include:

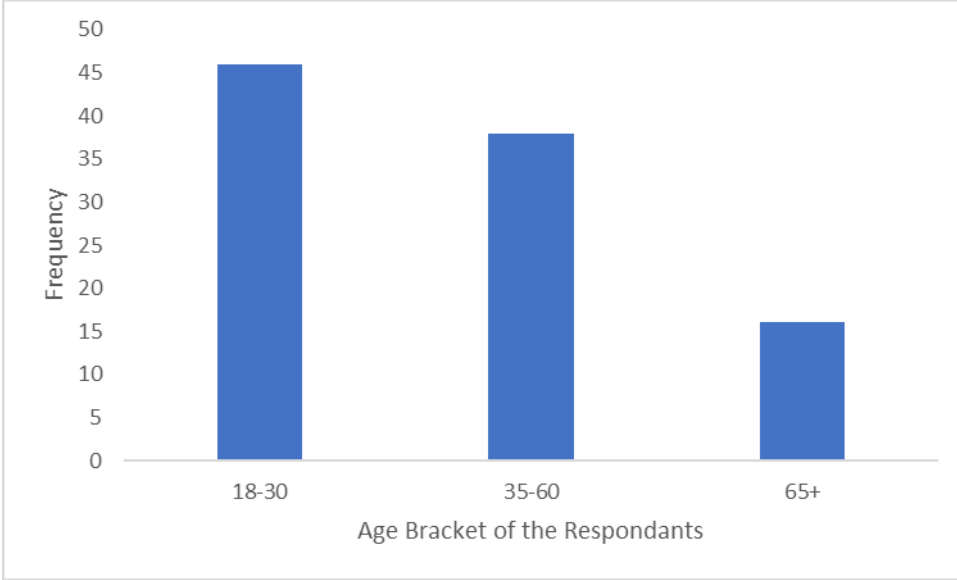
1. Kubi, which was formerly spoken in Bauchi
2. Kpati, which was formerly spoken in Taraba
3. Odut, which was formerly spoken in Cross River
4. Teshenawa, which was formerly spoken in Jigawa
5. Ajawa, which was formerly spoken in Bauchi
6. Holma, which was formerly spoken in Adamawa
7. Auyokawa, which was formerly spoken in Jigawa
8. Gamo-Ningi, which was formerly spoken in Bauchi
9. Gasa-Gumma, which was formerly spoken in Niger.

**Methodology for the Survey Taken**

Quantitative survey was used and the population of study were the states in the South West. Through purposive sampling, 100 respondents were chosen and simple random technique was used to select units to represent the six states in the South West. SPSS was used to analyse the data gotten through the structured questionnaires distributed to the respondents.

**Data Analysis**

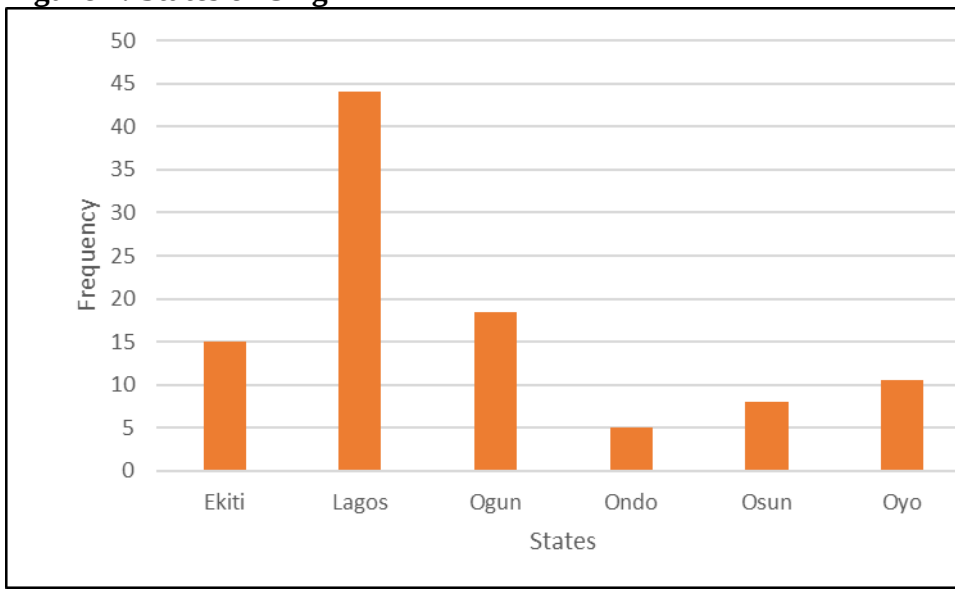
**Figure 1: Age Bracket of the Respondents**




| Age bracket of the respondents | frequency |
|---|---|
| 18-30 | 46 |
| 35-60 | 38 |
| 65+ | 16 |

Since most of the respondents to the questionnaires shared are youths, they can be classified as the active population.

**Figure 2: States of Origin**



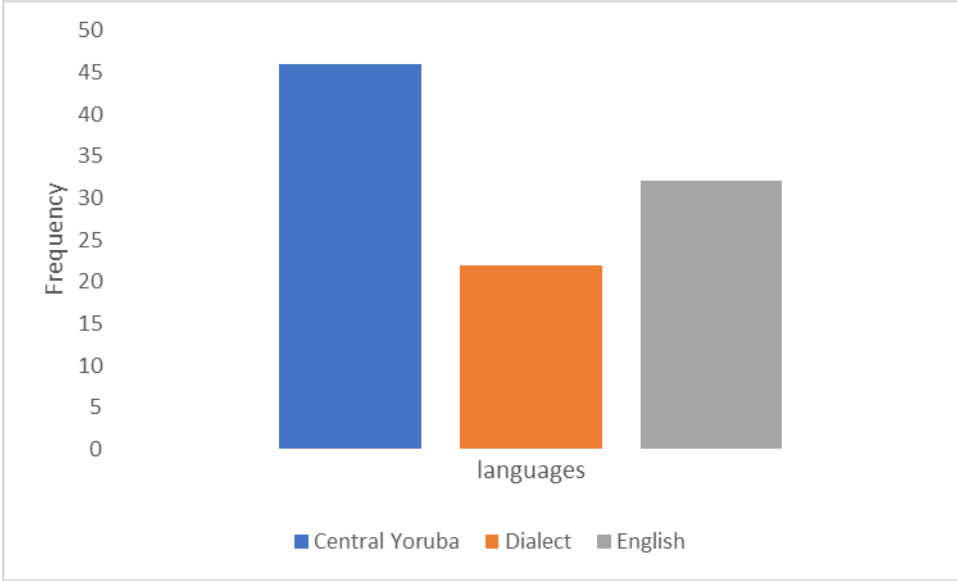

| States | Frequency |
|---|---|
| Ekiti | 15 |
| Lagos | 44 |
| Ogun | 19 |
| Ondo | 5 |
| Osun | 7 |
| Oyo | 10 |

The table above shows that the respondents are from the South West region (Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo). This implies that this analysis is focused on the Yoruba speaking region.

**Evaluation of Objective**

This study tends to achieve one objective which is to discover the extent to which English has affected the dialects and major indigenous languages in Nigeria.

**Figure 3**




| Language | Frequency |
|---|---|
| Central Yoruba | 46 |
| Yoruba Dialects | 22 |
| English | 32 |

To ascertain the rate at which the central Yoruba and the dialects are gradually being replaced by the English language, this study checks the way native speakers use the Yoruba language. It was revealed that about 46 of the respondents are comfortable in speaking central Yoruba, while 22 are comfortable with their dialect and 32 prefer speaking the English language.

The implication of this is that though central Yoruba is still central in communication in the South West, looking at the way some native speakers are comfortable with speaking the English language alone, the Yoruba language and its dialects are at the verge of being deserted.

The findings of this research include the facts that:

- The youths view the central Yoruba and English language as the standard language for effective communication, and they prefer them to their dialects.
- The factors responsible for the dwindling indigenous language use includes the fact that while the English language is a class marker, there is lack of financial self-reliance in using the indigenous languages which make youths have a negative attitude towards it.
- Students studying the indigenous languages as a discipline in the universities and other higher institutions do so reluctantly, as they were offered that instead of the courses of their choice and most would continue in the struggle to get their preferred courses.
- The indigenous languages will progressively die out in a matter of years if care is not taken.

**The Gradual Death of the Minority Languages in Nigeria**

Though we have different dialects of a language, we also have standard forms which can be defined as the "prestige variety of language used within a speech community, which cuts across regional differences, providing a unified means of communication, and thus an institutionalised norm which can be used in the mass media, in teaching the language to foreigners and so on." (Crystal, 2006). While there is a form of mutual intelligibility among indigenes, a lot of literature has emerged in the language. A great disadvantage of this is the fact that other dialects of the indigenous languages would become endangered and may die.

In line with this, Usman (2014) asserts that the most important reasons for linguicide in Nigeria are, "the official policies and practices of imperial powers and the subjugation, consciously or unconsciously, of the languages of smaller groups by those of larger or more powerful entities".

Examples of these dialects in the Yoruba language include Ijebu, Ijesa, Awori, Ekiti, Info, Oyo, Akomo, and Ikale.
In Igbo, we have: Awka, Onitsha, Nsukka, Orlu, Ikwerre, pidgin English, an adulteration of English language by its second speakers.

**The Gradual Death of the Major Languages in Nigeria**

There was a report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2006 that some of the minor African languages including Igbo which is one of the major languages in Nigeria are dying and will be extinct by 2050. Note that this is a result of the gradual death that is happening to Nigeria and other countries that speak English as their second language.

It should be noted that there is a higher rate of illiteracy in the northern part of Nigeria which has hindered the onslaught of the English language there. So, except in the Sabogari areas, Hausa is still widely spoken both in the urban and rural communities.

**How Igbo Language Dies Gradually**

Many youths now code switch and code mix the Igbo and English languages. This may lead to the gradual death of the Igbo language as such youths would not be able to pass an unadulterated Igbo language to their children. Here, are some examples:

- STANDigodi UP
- JUST legodi
- CHECKie m in the next ten minutes
- SENDiaram airtime
- HELPutumjuoya
- Ahorom I ENTERgodi bike
- AkamnaeTHINKiya
- A dim BUSY kita, a gam
- STARTia the gen

Also, the spelling of some Igbo words which could not be pronounced properly by the whites is being adapted. The authorities in charge should look into it and address the situation. Examples are words like,

- "Ibo" - this is not the right spelling. The correct one is "Igbo".
- "Awka" – the right spelling for this town in Anambra State is "oka".
- Ibusa – the right spelling of this town in Delta State is "Igbuzor".

**Consequences of Linguicide in Nigeria**

**A Loss of Identity**

Many Nigerians can only speak English, which is not a good idea because English is to them, a second language, and for one to be a second language learner, that means the person must have acquired the first language. This becomes a problem for a native speaker because it will question his identity. Linguicide amounts to the eroding of one's identity and culture because once one cannot speak his language, one would lose a part of himself.

An excerpt of the drama text of Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman will be used to buttress this aspect. Note that this is the scene where the colonial masters had imposed themselves and their cultural values (languages) on the territory of Nigeria (Oyo state) and one of the men chosen to work with them felt that the Yoruba language was barbaric and had already started attempting the English language, in the bid to abandon his mother tongue.

**Amusa**: I am order you now to clear the road...
**Woman**: What road? The one your father built?
(Shouting above the laughter)…
**Amusa**: I warn you women to clear the road.
**Woman**: To where?
**Amusa**: To that hut. I know he dey dere.
**Woman**: Who?
**Amusa**: The chief who call himself Elesin Oba.

**Woman**: you ignorant man... Soyinka, 1975

The above excerpt shows the deliberate act of degrading the Yoruba indigenous language by Amusan. The woman he had this conversation with was quick to note that the act of code-mixing in the bid to speak the English language makes the Yoruba language to appear inferior and if others decide to imbibe his culture, the Yoruba language could become extinct.

**A Sign of Bondage**

It is rather ironical that despite Nigeria gaining her independence from the Europeans in 1960, we have not fully loosened ourselves from their shackles. The lack of reference for our indigenous language shows that there is a greater value placed on the language of the Europeans, thereby making our languages inferior. It should be noted that while English language is considered by many as the universal language, some developed countries such as Russia and China place more importance on their indigenous languages and this has made them part of the most respected countries in the world.

**Loss of Birth Right**

Every language is unique since the language embodies unique and distinctive cultures and traditions which is a symbol of their exclusive contributions to the knowledge in the world. Every speech community is entitled to its indigenous language. It is a form of inheritance that was passed down to them by their parents. If they are not able to pass it down to their future generation, then that means they have lost their birth right.

**Lack of Proficiency in the Foreign Language**

Eyisi (2003) notes that "accuracy in speech and writing makes effective understanding a reality. But wrong spelling, defective punctuation, poor pronunciation, and erroneous sentences or misuse of words can hinder communication"

When one abandons his native language for another, one is bound to make errors in the language which could hinder effective communication.

It is evident in the diction of Amusa as seen in the excerpt above, it is difficult for a native speaker to achieve proficiency in a foreign language except if one studies the language for a long period, and even at that, native competence may still not be assured in terms of accuracy and pronunciation.

**No Unique Way of Seeing the Universe**

The importance of language is beyond communication. There are some unique features which include proverbs, rituals, idioms, religion, dance, and ceremonies which every particular language makes irreplaceable. According to Usman (2014), "Language represents its speakers' way of viewing and interpreting the universe, be that universe physical, spiritual or social." An indigenous language that is fostered by language diversity encourages innovative thinking and also highlights different ways of seeing the universe.

**Lack of Social Balance and Self-Preservation**

One of the consequences of linguicide is the death of our personhood, identity and culture. When the language of a people is lost, a part of them is lost too. The collapse in the aspect of the culture of the people would lead to a social imbalance caused by a decline in their cultural heritage and the loss of knowledge as regards certain indigenous acts, myths, local remedies to injuries and songs which won't be healthy for them.

**Foreign Naming**

One of the ways of identifying the indigenous background of Nigerians is through their names. Unfortunately, while some parents give their children indigenous names which are rich in meaning, the same cannot be said for others who go ahead to give

their children foreign names even without knowing their meanings. An example is Linda, an English name which means snake. Some Nigerian parents give their children foreign names without realizing the negativity attached to it.

**No Sign of Unity and Oneness**

Indigenous languages are voices of unity and critical scrutiny of history shows that it was after the white men (whites) banned the languages of our ancestors that they were able to weaken them. In line with that, Rey noticed that "our languages empowered and united us when we spoke them. importance of our indigenous languages." When a language dies, there can be no sincere connection between people in a community.

**Summary of the Findings**

The research based on gradual language death of both the minor and major languages in Nigeria reveals that the cliché 'charity begins at home' indeed applies to this context as parents are mostly to blame for not taking time to teach their children their indigenous languages. It also reveals a myriad of detrimental effects resulting from the marginalization of indigenous languages, including the erosion of cultural identity, limited access to education and economic opportunities, and the exacerbation of social inequalities.

**Contributions of this Research to Knowledge**

This research has helped to deepen readers understanding on the linguistic landscape in Nigeria by highlighting the marginalization of indigenous languages and its implications for linguistic diversity. It sheds light on how language marginalization affects educational attainment and access, thereby contributing to discussions on the importance of language-inclusive policies in the educational sector. By discussing the consequences of language marginalization on cultural heritage, the journal underscores the importance of preserving and promoting indigenous languages as essential components of Nigeria's cultural identity.

Then, by analysing the consequences of language marginalization, the journal informs language policy-making processes, advocating for policy reforms that prioritise linguistic diversity and the rights of language minority groups.

Overall, the journal's contributions deepen the reader's understanding of the complex interplay between language, culture, education, and social dynamics in Nigeria, providing valuable insights for researchers, policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders invested in language revitalization and inclusive development efforts.

**Conclusion**

Our indigenous languages are part of our culture and once they die, the unique way of seeing the world dies with it. This is why the need for language revitalization is very compulsory in Nigeria. To retain our indigenous languages and prevent them from dying, some critical steps need to be taken. Such steps include parents (who primarily play a strong role in developing primary language in children) being discouraged from maximizing the use of the English language in the homes and ensuring that their indigenous languages are their children's first language.

Also, the federal government of Nigeria should make it a rule that the indigenous languages in each region should serve as the language of instruction in the primary schools and a curriculum subject in secondary schools to ensure that the younger generation becomes familiar with it, and it is important that parents give their children indigenous names and not foreign names as naming is an important aspect of one's culture.

Also, while they might speak English in the school to show their academic status and literacy, parents should communicate with their children in their indigenous languages while at home. This should be done while they are still in crèche. This will definitely

improve the rate at which children will value their indigenous languages. Daniel (2013) notes that the failure of language transmission is the fault of the parents, for not passing their cultural duties to their children and there will always be a cultural gap in the children's education except their parents take responsibility towards teaching their children their indigenous language at home.

Also, school administrators should note the importance of the students speaking their indigenous languages, and thus, the prohibition placed on speaking "vernacular" should be reviewed as "since schools are about literacy, one could argue that to do anything with indigenous languages in schools presupposes promoting indigenous language literacy" (Reyhner and Lockard (2009).

Then credit in English should not only be the prerequisite in gaining admission into the tertiary institution. Credit in an indigenous language as a prerequisite to gaining admission should also be emphasised so that the younger generation will see a need to hold on to their indigenous languages.

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