



## GLOBALIZATION AS A CAUSE FOR LANGUAGE EXTINCTION: A CASE STUDY OF NIGERIAN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

Christian E. C. Ogwudile  
Department of Igbo, African & Communication Studies  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka  
[cec.ogwudile@unizik.edu.ng](mailto:cec.ogwudile@unizik.edu.ng)  
08037468693

### Abstract

One can look at globalization from economic, cultural and socio-political perspectives including Information and Communication Technology (ICT). For this reason, it is seen as the increasing empowerment of Western cultural values including language, philosophy and world view. In many African countries of which Nigeria is inclusive, English language which is the language of colonization is gradually becoming a global language due to its influence and subsequent adoption as the official language by many African nations which are largely multi-cultural and multilingual. This trend has not only relegated the status of Nigerian Indigenous languages to the background, but has also threatened their existence in Nigeria which accommodates over 400 native languages. If we fail to check this trend, the ill-wind of globalization which blows no one any good, will gradually sweep the native languages including the so-called major ones (Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba) out of existence particularly in Nigeria. This paper therefore uses descriptive method to discuss globalization as one of the major factors for language endangerment with respect to Nigeria as a nation, with a view to proffering possible solutions capable of sustaining and empowering the nation's socio-cultural and economic stability. The study recommends areas necessary for sustaining indigenous languages from extinction.

**Keywords:** globalization, empowerment, languages, endangerment, multilingual

### Introduction

Tisko (2004) posits that African continent is said to be the world's most linguistically diverse. It is established that the Central African Republic with a population of about 3 million has 18 distinct language groups; Cameroon - 279 languages; Democratic Republic of Congo 221 languages; Chad 127 languages; Tanzania 131 languages, Zimbabwe 16 languages and Nigeria, a whopping 400 languages Romain, (2007: 115) opines, "As predicted by many scholars that, as many as 60 to 90% of the world's languages, about 6,900 of them are at risk of extinction within the next 100 years". Tsiko (2004) equally laments over UNESCO's report that between 500 to 600 of African's languages are declining out of which 250 languages are under threat and gradually disappearing forever. The UNESCO's World Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing (2001) estimates that 50% of languages may be in various degrees of endangerment. Igbo and many other minority languages in Nigeria are at the risk of possible extinction in the next 50-100 years if nothing serious is done to revive them.



According to Odugu (2011), “with the continued expansion and patronizing of “international languages” such as English and French, the credibility of indigenous language programmes will no doubt become weak and highly vulnerable”. This is in addition to the negative effect of globalization threatening the existence and survival of indigenous languages. Tarugarira (2009:139) argues that: language endangerment is not peculiar to Nigeria’s indigenous languages alone; it cuts across other African nations and the world at large. According to him, Kenya’s indigenous languages appear to be fading the worst with sixteen languages on death list. The country (Kenya) by far surpasses their neighbour Uganda where six languages are under threat and Tanzania with eight languages about to disappear (p. 139). It is estimated that a language becomes extinct roughly every two weeks.

According to Joseph, Johanna, Neil and Ilse (2003:8), “competition between Afrikaans and English is itself reminiscent of that which occurred between various European national languages and English in North America, as they ‘collided’ within the same socio-economic structure and lost to English language”. Fishman, 2001; Agwuele, 2010; Tarugarira, 2009; Ode, 2015 and Dega, 2015 aver that the evidence for the concern languages under threat can be seen in the steady stream of works available on sociolinguistic issue. Dega (2015) expressing his concern about language endangerment and its apparent causes, posits that it is estimated that mostly in some regions across the world; about 90% of the languages may be replaced by dominant languages at the end of the 21st century.

A major reason behind this prediction is that, fewer than 4% of the world’s languages have official status in their respective countries, where they are spoken. Most of them are unwritten, and only restricted to local community and homes where they are spoken by small group of people. Relatively, other factors responsible for language endangerment include attitudinal problems towards indigenous languages, especially by the elites who neither speak their native languages nor allow their children to learn them at home. In the word of Romain (2007: 121) “languages are at risk when they are no longer transmitted naturally to children in the home by parents or other caretakers”. In addition, other issues such as unpredicted human migration due to war/insurgency (Boko Hram), famine, and disaster are other factors that are capable of dislodging people from their settlements.

The fact that, devastating ferocious diseases, habitat displacement as well as impact of globalization lead to language and cultural extinction. This paper examines Nigerian indigenous languages with a view to ascertain the impact of globalization. Possible relevant solutions capable of changing the situation for the better towards language development and national cohesion have been proffered.

### **Concept of Globalization**

Some scholars see globalization as a very complex phenomenon that has been defined in various ways. According to Wikipedia, it is the process of international integration arising from the interchange of world views, products, ideas and other aspects of culture. Adedimeji (2009) sees it as the increasing empowerment of Western cultural values, including language, philosophy and worldview and the predominance of escalation in the mobility of labour, information and services. He in addition says that, like all revolutions, globalization appears to threaten the economic, socio-cultural, linguistic, educational and political independence of all people in the World such that



the question of survival in the global World is central to developing nations among which Nigeria ranks high.

This clearly portrays that globalization is a serious issue that is transforming every aspect of human life and national endeavour including their language and cultural values. Thus, it can be seen as a social process characterized by the existence of global economic, political, cultural, linguistic and environmental interconnections and flows that make the many of the currently existing borders and boundaries irrelevant. Globalization therefore, enables languages and their cultures to spread and dominate other minority languages on a global scale.

Many scholars have emphasized more on economic impact of globalization, where it is seen as a course of unification of global patterns of production and consumption. Kubota (2001) looks at globalization from sociolinguistic point and says, the tremendous impact of globalization on the world has engendered the entrenchment of the Anglo-American culture with the English language emerging as a global language spoken by more than two billion people across the world. This line of thought may hinge on the fact that, language is the lifeline of globalization. Without language, there would be no globalization and by extension, there would be no world languages as well. Fishman (2001:38) describes the linguistic situation of English “as both a consequence and a contributor to globalization. Apart from other attractive attributes, English is highly rated in terms of prestige, status and functionality”.

Awonusi (2006) points out that as the Nigerian linguistic space is not an exception to this emerging reality, one of the fundamental ways through which globalization affects the nation today is at the level of cultural and linguistic identity. In this regard, the linguistic situation in Nigeria is that of dominant and dominated languages at different degrees and stages. Dega (2015) unfolds that English has occupied a dominant status as it dominates the three major languages which in turn dominate the layers of the vast minority languages in the country through its official, instrumental and integrative functions. The dominant role of English language in Nigeria has reduced the status of local languages to the subsidiary level hence, local languages are seen and treated as “second if not third class languages”. For this reason, Dega (2015:18) further laments that:

It is fashionable now in Nigeria for parents to relate to their children in the home, in English, believing that it is the language that will be of a greater economic benefit to them, even when both parents come from the same ethnic group. The result therefore is that the local languages in Nigeria are threatened by the hegemony of English.

Furthermore, the role of English has increased by the desire to participate effectively in the gains of globalization with its technological know-how, the internet and integrated world economy, the computer and cyber age. Albeit, not all scholars believe that the indigenous languages can only play subsidiary roles or second fiddle in the current global trend. For instance, in an attempt to create awareness on the dangers inherent in neglecting the indigenous languages and transferring their crucial roles to English, Owolabi (2006) notes that:

The rapid and genuine technological, social and economic empowerment of the vast majority of Nigerians so as to enable them to utilize scientific and technological knowledge in creating wealth, self-reliance and equality of life and to contribute meaningfully to national development can only be



possible through the media of their own native languages but not through imposed foreign languages such as English and French.

It is therefore, enough to note that the current era of globalization appears on the surface to be antithetical to the survival of indigenous languages but it behoves every linguistic nationality as observed by Owolabi to preserve its cultural and linguistic heritage so as not to lose its past and present, and by extension, its future.

### **Language Endangerment and its Implications**

According to Agwuele (2010), language endangerment is a socio-linguistic term used to describe languages that are in the process of being eclipsed in their cultural domain by other languages. Hence, an endangered language is one likely to become extinct in the near future. Part of UNESCO Red Book's classification of language endangerment include those that are "extinct" and "nearly extinct". These refer to languages that have completely or nearly gone out of use or for which there are either only a few or no living speakers. However, Azuonye, (2002:41) posits that the criteria for defining "seriously endangered", "endangered" or "potentially endangered" languages vis-a-vis the "safe" or the "non-endangered" seem to be more nebulous. By this, Azuonye means that the definitions of 'seriously endangered', 'endangered' or 'potentially endangered' are vague or ill-defined.

Accordingly, there are many reasons why a language might become endangered or extinct. One of such factors is language contact. In this case, when two or more languages come into contact with one another for one reason or the other, the possibility of a major language dominating the weaker ones is there. The report of UNESCO reveals that as many as 50% of the world's languages are no longer being learned by new generations of speakers, thus weakening and endangering their existence.

Relatively, in the organisation's compilation of dying languages in the world in a book titled: *Red Book on Endangered Languages*, it is shown that more than 36 Nigerian languages are gradually dying. It further adds that the world could be dominated by very few languages in the nearest future. Even one of the major Nigerian languages, Igbo is among those recently predicted by UNESCO Advisory Committee on languages that may be heading for extinction if nothing is done to curtail the situation and ensure their survival and safety.

The consequence of language endangerment comes out more on the culture of the speech community which usually suffers the same fate with the language. This is because language and culture share mutual relationship and go hand in hand, hence a loss language is a loss culture and consequently, loss of knowledge and identity. In essence, the loss of language also causes the loss of other culturally significant practices that are dependent on the language. For example, oral histories and traditions are lost if no one can speak the language any longer. Just as traditional songs, poetry and other verbal artistic forms are also lost with the language.

Language loss, as a matter of fact, which can occur when a language is extremely endangered beyond recovery, has a significant implication on both the collective and the individual identities of the speech community. In Africa, more especially Nigeria and Ghana that passed through British colonisation, the so-called elites cherish Western cultures much more than their traditions. They discourage their children from



speaking their mother-tongues (MT) or practice their traditional cultures. Rather, they encourage them to speak more of English language and dress like Europeans. What a shame aping into foreign culture?

It is important to note that in Nigeria, the Federal Government has found out the enormous importance of language as a tool for social interaction, national unity and development. Hence, the National Policy on Education (NPE) was introduced in 1977 which was revised in 1981, 1998 and 2004 as a way of ensuring the sustenance of the various languages in the country, particularly the major languages – Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba and prevent them from going into extinction or being endangered. No doubt this constitutional provision on language was applauded by all and sundry, but the implementation is not encouraging and quite lacking.

The speakers of other minority languages due to their agitations, felt they are being short-changed because these policies did not extend to them to get the same national recognition like that of Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba and coupled with the poor implementation of the language policy, made the entire process ineffective and thereby failing to ensure the survival of the languages. Moreover, as an alternative or rather complementary measure to address the issue of language endangerment in the nation, Adegbija (1994), Bamgbose (2016), have advocated what is referred to as ‘linguistic social responsibility’. It is a call for linguists to ensure usage of mother tongues in extended domains. In doing so, it can be construed as a strategy for mitigating language endangerment in our local environment.

### **Globalization and Language Endangerment in Nigeria**

Languages of the world perform communicative role and every group aspires to promote her language no matter how small or big. However, language is a veritable tool for globalization which is more or less a phenomenon that has strong desire to use a common language (English) in its processes of integrating social, economic, cultural and political life of the people in the world using a common language.

Due to the great importance attached to the English language in Nigeria which serves as official language and the lingua franca, as well as its relevance in global communication process, most of the local languages have been relegated to the background. Ndimele (2005:125) opines that the fortunes of a language are tied to the fortunes of its speakers. Hence, when a people become important, their languages also become important, and people for whom the language is not their mother tongue will struggle to learn it for obvious reasons. This is applicable to the attitude of Nigerians toward English and the indigenous languages. In this regard, Babajide (2001:35) maintains that:

as far and language learning and acquisition is concerned, especially in Nigeria where there is pronounced linguistic multiplicity or plurality of languages such that adjacent communities use mutually unintelligible languages, people tend to be more favourably and positively disposed to using and tolerating a language that has a considerable national and international coverage of users; a metropolitan or consumption status; a considerable numerical strength and some measure of economic and political power and a sufficiently reliable codified form (35).

From all indications, there is no gain saying that the above attributes favour English language and neither any of the Nigerian indigenous languages. Consequently, in





Nigeria today, English is used in most situations: at home, office, market, school, churches and in social gatherings for all imaginable communications or interactions: formal, informal, cordial, casual and so on.

According to Bamgbose (2016:26), “the attitude of the Nigerian elite to indigenous languages reflects that they are plagued by linguistic imperialism. This is an attitude that sees it as normal towards continued use of European languages in all advanced sectors of human life”. Oyetade (2001:47)avers,“this is attributable to the inferior status accorded the indigenous language on the school curriculum”

Babajide (2001:35) equally maintains that people’s attitudes towards the local languages are bound to be negative due to their shortcomings such as: their restriction in use to a few native speakers; being mere vernaculars, not yet codified; associated only with rural and their irrelevance to the socio-economic and political needs of the people. While these undesirable attributes are no longer tenable to some of the indigenous languages, especially the major ones, such cannot be said of the numerous others. It is sufficient to note that all these attitudinal problems associated with the indigenous languages since the introduction and subsequent adoption of English as official languages and the nation’s lingua franca has contributed in no small measure in endangering the indigenous languages particularly in Nigeria and African continent as a whole.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In view of the foregoing, it can be inferred that globalization is a multi-faceted phenomenon that touches every aspect of human life such as economic, social, political, commercial, information, communication, technology as well as linguistics. It is an agent of transformation and its impact both negative and positive are being felt across the globe. This discussion dwelled more on the linguistic aspect of globalization and specifically on the dominance of English language, which is regarded as a global language. In essence, the domination of Nigerian indigenous languages in Nigeria by English language has therefore endangered their lives and is consequently pushing them into extinction. The influence of the English Language on indigenous Languages in Nigeria is nothing to write home about.

The study also looked at the implication of language loss and by extension, loss of the peoples’ cultural values and identity which could be very devastating. This is because loss of ones language means loss of ones identity. Furthermore, the paper therefore, discussed the impact of globalization on language endangerment at both local and international levels. While the study projected English language to be a global language, the indigenous languages are being relegated to the background and this makes them non-attractive even to the intuitive speakers or owners of these languages. The question now is, must the indigenous languages in

Nigeria be allowed to go into extinction or die in the face of globalization before something could be done? If, the answer is in the negative, then how can they be reanimated, sustained and empowered to cope with the future challenges in a globalized society? To address this situation, the study made the following recommendations:

- (a) There is the need for attitudinal change in favour of the native languages to foster their status, usage and relevance in the society.



- (b) That enough efforts should be made to ensure that indigenous languages are used in extended domains.
- (c) There is the need to review the National Language Policy so as to adequately promote the teaching and learning of indigenous languages in schools across the country, as well as to ensure its proper implementation at all levels.
- (d) There should be proper implementation of the constitutional provisions on indigenous languages, which include their usage from time to time in the law making as well as judicial processes.
- (e) Furthermore, credit pass in any of the indigenous languages in school certificate examinations should be made compulsory and a pre-requisite for admission into higher institutions of learning. This will strongly arouse and increase the interest of the youths towards the study of the languages.
- (f) Graduates in the Nigerian languages should be given automatic employment in some strategic government offices to further motivate the younger generations.

Conclusively, certain aspects of globalization like the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) should be harnessed and channeled towards the sustenance and development of these local languages specifically the internet and computers which could be used to source, store and disseminate information pertaining to these languages. There are language websites that dwell on language research and documentations as well as teaching and learning of other languages. If the recommendations above can be properly considered for implementation, it will go a long way in sustaining the indigenous languages and making them much more relevant in the society for the betterment of the indigenes in particular and humanity in general.

## References

- Adedimeji, M. A. (2009). *Globalization and the survival of the Nigerian cultural linguistic heritage. The American paradigm*. Ilorin: University of Ilorin.
- Adebija, E. (1994). The context of language planning in Africa: An illustration with Nigeria. In M. Putz (Ed.) *Language Contact and Language Conflict*. Amsterdam. Philadelphia.
- Agwuele, O. (2010). Globalization, dying languages and the futility of saving them. *Mode of access:* [http://www.inst.at/trans/17Nr/1-3/1-3\\_agwuele17.htm](http://www.inst.at/trans/17Nr/1-3/1-3_agwuele17.htm) (дата обращения – 03.03. 2020).
- Awonusi, V. O. (2006). Language as an instrument of African identity in the age of globalization. *Science and Humanities Journal*, 1(1), 25-47.
- Azuonye, C. (2002). Igbo as an endangered language. In presented at the Seminar on the Problems and Methodology for the Preservation of the Igbo Language, at the Nicon-Noga Hotel, Abuja, under the Auspices of the World Bank Igbo Language Fund, 2002. 17.



Babajide, A. O. (2001). Language attitude patterns of Nigerians. In H. S. Igboanusi (ed.) *Language Attitude and Language Conflict in West Africa*, (pp. 1-13), Ibadan. Enicrownfit Pub.

Bamgbose, A. (2016). Language provisions of Nigeria's National Policy of Education: Declaration without implementation. A lead paper presented at NINLAN National conference Aba, March 7th- 11th.

Dega, A. (2015). Language endangerment: Globalization and the fate of minority languages in Nigeria. In O. M. Ndimele (Ed.) *Nigerian Linguists Festschrift Series*, (pp. 12-28), Port Harcourt M & J. Grand Orbit Communication.

Federal Republic of Nigeria (1977). National policy on education. Lagos, Nigeria: Ministry of Education.

Federal Republic of Nigeria (1981). National policy on education. Lagos, Nigeria: Ministry of Education.

Federal Republic of Nigeria (1998). National policy on education. Abuja, Nigeria: Ministry of Education.

Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004). National policy on education. Abuja, Nigeria: Ministry of Education.

Fishman, J. A. (2001). Why is it so hard to save a threatened language? (A perspective on the cases that follow). In *Can Threatened Languages be saved?* (pp. 1-22). Multilingual Matters.

Joseph, B. Jonna, D. Neil, J. & Ilse, L. (2003). *When languages collides: Perspectives on language conflict, language competition, and language co-existence*. Columbus: Ohio University Press.

Kubota, R. (2001). Teaching world Englishes to native speakers of English in the USA. *WorldEnglishes*, 20(1), 47-64.

Ndimele, O. M. (2005). ICT, globalization and the future of human language. In O. M.

Ndimele (Ed.) *Globalization and the Study of Languages in Africa*, (pp. 1-18). Port Harcourt: Grand Orbit and Emhai Press.

Ode, O. O. (2015). Threats to mother tongues in Nigeria: Strategies for revitalization. In O. M. Ndimele (Ed.) *The Linguists Festschrift Series*, (pp. 29-38). Port Harcourt: Grand Orbit and Emhai Press.

Odugu D. I. (2011). Education language policy process in multilingual society: Global visions and local agendas in India, Nigeria and UNESCO. Unpublished PhD thesis, Loyola Universit Chicago, USA.

Oyetade, S. O. (2001). Attitude to foreign languages and indigenous language use in Nigeria. In H. S. Igboanusi (Ed.) *Language Attitude and Language Conflict in West Africa*, (pp. 14-29). Ibadan: Enicrownfit.





Owolabi, K. (2006). Nigeria's native language modernization in specialized domains for National development: A linguist's approach. *An Inaugural Lecture*, University of Ibadan.

Romain, S. (2007). Preserving endangered languages. *Language and Linguistics Compass, Journal Compilation*, (1)1-2, 115-132.

Tarugarira, G. (2009). Rethinking the developmental nexus between indigenous languages and capacity building in science and technology: A therapeutic approach to Africa's perennial development problems. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, 10(4), 192-199.

Tsiko, S. (2004). Minority languages face extinction. *The Herald*, 17(05), 23-29.

UNESCO (2001). *World Atlas of the world's languages in danger of disappearing*. Paris: UNESCO.