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### Language Attitudes in Multilingual Societies: The Case of Nigeria's Linguistic Diversity

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#### Abstract:

This study explores language attitudes in Nigeria, a nation characterized by significant linguistic diversity, with over 500 languages spoken. By examining the perceptions, preferences, and prejudices associated with various languages in Nigeria, this research seeks to understand how these attitudes influence social identity, education, and communication. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach that includes surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions, the study reveals complex attitudes toward major languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, as well as minority languages. Findings indicate that while some languages are associated with prestige and socioeconomic advancement, others face stigma and marginalization. This disparity reflects broader social dynamics, including power relations, historical contexts, and cultural identities. The research highlights the implications of language attitudes for policy-making, especially in education and language preservation efforts. By shedding light on the intricate interplay between language, identity, and societal values in Nigeria, this study contributes to the understanding of multilingualism in contemporary contexts and offers insights for fostering linguistic inclusivity and promoting equitable language policies.

**Keywords:** language attitudes, multilingualism, Nigeria, linguistic diversity, social identity, education, communication, language policy.

#### 1. Introduction

Linguistic diversity is one of the most distinguishing features of Nigerian society. It manifests itself in the form of about 400 indigenous languages spoken and regionally distributed, constituting the paternal identity of a majority of indigenous nationalities or ethnic groups scattered all over the country. Although it is the mission of all states to continue to construct a common national identity, an understanding of the social processes and issues regarding the construction of the indigenous identities that are widespread throughout the country is necessary. As the pointers and carriers of

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regional and local identities of Nigerians, the indigenous languages are the cover upon which people rely in order to construct their individual and national identity (Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju 2022). While the scientific understanding of language has moved away from essentialist notions that closely link linguistic competence to a particular genotype or cultural essence, the psycholinguistics of language comprehension have converged with sociolinguistics in another perspective intimately linking language and identity in the sense of 'who people are' and 'who people are not'. From this perspective, identity is seen as constructed in a complex concept of social identity. This is thrown into stark relief when we take as a working definition of social identity the aspects of an individual's self-concept derived from his or her known associations and dealings with the organizations and also face-to-face groups that he or she either prefers or is constrained to be associated or disassociated. It is possible to see these faces as representations of one's ethnic identity, working identity, linguistic identity, national identity, and so on. In multilingual societies, more than one language is usually associated with a citizen. When individuals negotiate their social interactions and face-to-face affiliations according to these multiple social identities, the way in which the persona associated with the language, one of the ways in which the possessor's identity is negotiated, comes into play as a significant feature that influences the process and the outcome of that social interaction. The investigations on attitudes towards languages are intended to answer various questions that ultimately follow the main concern with linguistic attitudes (Kadiri et al.2022).

### **2. Historical Overview of Nigeria's Linguistic Diversity**

Nigeria's complex multilingual scene is considered a vivid example of a cluster of least developed countries endowed with diversified linguistic traditions and existing primarily within a developing environment. The emergence of such diversity has been attributed, in part, to a series of migrations by peoples and also to the interaction between northward-bound Sudanese peoples and their fellow southern neighbors. The succeeding invaders of the region also had their spin-off on the existing socio-cultural matrix of the peoples they met and on the languages the latter spoke. Within the most populous African country resides over five hundred languages of diverse ethnic groups. These ethnic groups have made significant contributions to the evolution of that nation. Some of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria include Hausa, Yoruba,

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Akanu Igbo, Kalabari-Ijo, Jukun, and the Kanuri. Interestingly, ethnic groups in Nigeria are immensely characterized by linguistic diversity (BABAYODE, 2022).

The various ethnic groups constitute the root of this linguistic diversity in Nigeria. The ethnic groups in Nigeria consist mainly of the indigenous Niger-Congo speakers and the Afro-Asiatic speakers. Being a multi-ethnic and predominantly rural country, Nigeria has had a long history of linguistic contact and language spread. This multilingual country has had to face many problems and challenges associated with language diversity and language use. In fact, language is a strong tool in molding and shaping the cultural values, norms, and identity of a community. However, in a multilingual society like Nigeria, the need for communication is a driving force towards linguistic creativity as people cohabit within a community. Nigeria, whose populace speaks over five hundred indigenous languages, of which Ejagham and English serve as second languages, is a land baffled by the cumbersome multilingual phenomenon. Nigeria emerged as a geopolitical entity in 1914 when the then British governor amalgamated the Northern and Southern Protectorates for economic and effective administration of the country (Nzeaka & Ehondor, 2021).

### **3. Theoretical Frameworks for Studying Language Attitudes**

Language attitudes are the domain of study for various theoretical frameworks, notably sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics, which focus on explaining the human cognitive faculty for perceiving language. The view of language as a social phenomenon, inextricably linked to power divisions between different social groups, speaks to language attitudes. Social power distributions create a sociolinguistic hierarchy in which one language, standard and official, tends to be valorized at the cost of non-standard and indigenous languages. This unequal language distribution, with a lower political power to advocate for or enforce a language, results in a changed speaker. The essential and taken-for-granted nature of Standard English Models (SEMs) means that their bias may illuminate the societal power structures from the standpoint of the urban elite, while warnings against neglecting the negative SEM as typically representative of peripheralization that regularly threatens and changes language shift in the third world. These views will cast a critical eye on the SEM collection this study initially entertained.

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Two general currents have evolved in the development of methods of measuring language attitudes: the anthropological model and the hypothetical dichotomous pair. The familiar nature of the grammaticality judgment attracted research into language attitudes. Two general definitions have been formulated to detect language attitudes, both considering the great variation of social psychological attributes associated with language use for the speakers concerned. The anthropological view poses a typical Standard English Language (SEL) measurement strategy of inventing a list of attributes, or perceptual markers, one would predict to be represented in their society on the basis of supposedly reflecting language-related interactional patterns. Thus, it becomes focused not on one set of speakers but on characteristics related to communication that the speaker uses in relation to others. In contrast, the hypothetical/dichotomous pair view reflects a sociological theoretical orientation that respondents can evaluate and downplay positively the belonging to a group of speakers using certain variables, or negatively, give credit to belonging to another group based on, again, a set of variables. Laboriously, the collection of language attitude variables was created using this view. The first model invokes the social psychological congruence variables concerning actual given symbols taken as belonging in a set-by-set contrast. The second considers the predictors of hypothetical communication content to which the speaker must express attitudes regarding the values associated with the hypothetical symbol (Agoke, 2022). This determination, however, did not result in the undeveloped structure of the data. At the end of the collection are two sets of comparable proxy data for the two models in the Axiom set and the Evaluation set. Crucially, it speaks to the interpretation of language attitudes: is the speaker's orientation intrinsic, and so flags are raised when it fails to resonate, or is it extrinsic, meaning it is dependent upon the context? In sum, careful attention to language attitude measurement methods is critical (Muhammad, 2021).

#### **4. Methodological Approaches in Language Attitude Research**

Language attitude research on a society's multilingualism does not have a straightforward answer, as several methodological approaches can be considered depending on the research question. However, qualitative and quantitative approaches can be used side by side to provide detailed information about a given group of language speakers. Although this linguistically informed mixed-method research

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provides us with a more comprehensive data set on language attitudes in a given community, it is important to use qualitative and quantitative research designs in a sensitive and context-bound way. This way, both personal and community-related language attitudes may be accounted for in the research design. In surveys, mainly quantitative data are collected, while interview methods allow for further elaboration and clarification. However, even if the interviewer is from the same social group, qualitative methods always run the risk of projecting researcher priorities and culturally biased constructs. In most cases, one-to-one interviews are conducted outside the target communities to ensure privacy and confidentiality. In general, speaking about language use and language attitudes in wider society in front of community leaders or other community members should not be an issue. However, research on sociolinguistic variation has often been controversial and sensitive, as data collection may violate cultural norms in communities where there is a formal hierarchy or power between people. Managerial issues of the research setting also imply some degree of empowerment of the informants who provide the linguistic data, in that the way the community members report their linguistic habits and attitudes depends to a large extent on their pre-understandings and conceptions of what is expected of them. In this sense, participatory methods often prove to be effective in revealing the ways in which the community 'sees itself.' It was also established that using information about actors' representations, including their language attitudes, is essential in predicting language behavior (SHUAIBU, 2022).

### 5. Findings and Analysis

The data collection and analysis have provided clear information on language attitudes in Nigeria. The high-level patterns in the attitudes of the over two hundred million Nigerian people can be seen in the data. The attitude that mother tongues are the most important languages can be seen in people's attitudes. There are also people who think English, due to its use in global and government contexts, is the most important language, and others for whom other Nigerian languages are important. Unsurprisingly, people outside of the established power elites are more likely to think of other Nigerian languages as the most important. In keeping with the idea of Hausa being a regional "lingua franca," it is the language of non-Hausa people in the north that is most likely to be considered the most important in the region. Hausa, Arabic,

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and English appear to be considered important by people in the region in about equal measure, while those who are not ethnically Hausa are more inclined to think of Hausa and Arabic.

At the state level, English is most likely to be considered the most important in the south. Here, those who are not from the state where they were interviewed were significantly more likely to cite English as the most important. In some states, residents are very likely to cite their indigenous language as the most important. Moreover, residents of these states are unlikely to cite the same languages as being the most important, despite the high percentages for their own indigenous languages. It is expected that the stated linguistic diversity of Nigeria would render opinions on linguistic matters diverse. The data reflects that. But irrespective of who is speaking, all, generally speaking, give certain crucial themes: mother tongue (or vernacular) is important, and in most opinions, should be used to educate children in nursery and primary school age. There are divergent arguments, however, when the focus shifts to the language to be used at secondary and tertiary levels of education, thereby reflecting the long-standing sociopolitical diversity that has bedeviled Nigeria (Norro, 2022).

For example, a South-westerner (Yoruba) holds the view that English should be used from secondary school upward as a form of preparing their children for the wider world, in addition to the argument that it is a "lingua franca" which all in Nigeria understand. While a North-central person (Tiv) supports the use of Tiv (his mother tongue) as a medium of instruction for children in nursery and primary school education, he believes that only those in areas where the political and social circumstances permit should use it at the secondary school education level. This difference is confirmatory of studies on language and social interaction, and the role of language in the creation of social identity and the construction of social reality. Indeed, social psychology stresses the centrality of linguistic phenomena which reflect and express social structures and processes. Attitudinal surveys, with responses from individuals drawn from varying strata of age, sex, educational backgrounds, languages, religion, occupations, etc., reflect this complex interplay of forces that have shaped these respondents in regard to language management and language relationships. At the same time, there are a few "sites of violence" within the country

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where, paradoxically, linguistic diversity has led to conflict in varying measures (Olayoku, 2022).

### **6. Implications for Language Policy and Planning**

As language attitudes are the affective side of any language structure and shape linguistic behavior, they are essential for policy planners who would like to understand, explain, or manipulate behavioral patterns. Since policies are strategic objectives, they should reflect actual language practices. The principal importance of this is the demographic configuration of society and the explicit choice of policy about linguistic diversity. In the context of Nigeria, the population-level studies suggest that speakers' actual language practices are often different from the explicit stipulations made by policy, as informed by attitudes against the Nigerian presence of a specific language. This has implications for policy around language use in public domains and for language management in the educational and societal integration field. In recognizing the conflicts in international evidence around the relationship between linguistic diversity and societal cohesion, it is possible to suggest that the development of arguments in favor of whole-of-society intervention in multilingual policy areas may be more productive than arguments in favor of exclusivity or assimilation (Salami & Akande, 2021).

Considering the role of compulsory education in language attitudes and usage, the question that follows is whether the present state of widespread linguistic death in Nigeria is reversible through education alone. There are two schools of thought in the language policy literature concerning the role of language attitudes in understanding whether language policies are effective. In the first school, attitudes are regarded as immaterial to policy. The empirical evidence argues in defense of the materiality of attitudes as it relates to how people actually behaved in relationship to the prominent language policies. In the Nigerian context, university entrance and exit data collection, and the practices in the labor market, service provision, and governance administration itself could provide data that gives an indicator of the justice of prevailing language policy. It follows, therefore, that genuine policy analysis and evaluation would need to engage with the issues raised in this report. In the second school, which includes the Nigerian policymakers and practitioners, attitudes are



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relevant. It is recognized that in order for a language policy to be successful, it has to be acceptable to those who carry it out.

### **7. Conclusion and Future Directions**

7. Conclusion and Future Directions. This chapter sets out with the aim of bringing together evidence on a multilingual society's attitudes toward their languages, an area seemingly under-researched in comparison to monolingual contexts. The picture that has begun to emerge with the insight that grassroots multidisciplinary research can unveil is one of a dynamic society in socio-economic transition accompanied by shifts in attitudes.

Negative attitudes are still reported toward many Nigerian languages, which still have to overcome a historical legacy—a legacy driven by colonial period language shift and 'modernization' discourses that promote dominant languages and devalue Indigenous Nigerian languages. As a British colony, Nigeria was the subject of the 'colonial language policy' inherently depicted to value metropolitan linguistic and cultural practice over subordinated language practice. Since independence in 1960, English has remained the language of business and instruction, and today Nigerian educational practice within inclusive state theory does not directly address and resolve linguistic inequality—the power dimension of language skills that leads to the social exclusion of people who are speakers of minority languages. There are some areas where people who speak multi-ethnic/linguistic languages do, to a degree, value these languages, but overall the findings revealed people's dislike of these languages due to a number of reasons expressed as poor language style, widespread misuse with no standard, and dialects that make these groups a target for ridicule (Adegbite & May, 2022).

Subsequent demographic changes and their attendant social consequences complicate this already complex scenario and require some further insight. Our data only reflect current attitudes, and it remains to be seen how earlier stigma and negative language attitudes percolate through and perhaps influence later life language use and maintenance, or indeed provoke a further erosion of minority language practice. Another useful area for further investigation may be the social role of languages—are the stigmatized languages actually used in rituals and festivals, for example, and if not, why not? This kind of information is important for effective community engagement.



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As engaging the broader society in issues of linguistic diversity becomes more and more necessary across the globe, the need for more grassroots qualitative engagement in different projects is pressing.

This study's achievement, as well as this prior research, provides insight into the way in which a range of different disciplines are beginning to engage with the issues of language attitude and linguistic diversity. The success of such multidisciplinary investigation is that it provides a rich and stimulating approach that moves beyond dry statistic-based demography and enters into society and community not just as living numbers or as sociological ciphers, but as people. There are many lines of future research that are interesting. To continue to investigate language attitudes at different levels of society, to engage in more cross-disciplinary work on the theme to understand multiculturalism, tolerance, as well as marginalization in a society, would be a fruitful future approach.

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