

Linguistic Slavery: The Nigerian Experience

Kehinde Olufemi Ogunyemi 

Adekunle Ajasin University, Nigeria 

Abstract

This paper critically examines the concept of linguistic slavery as a postcolonial reality in Nigeria, where the continued dominance of the English language reflects and reinforces a deep-seated legacy of colonialism. Since Nigeria gained political independence in 1960, the colonial language (English) remains the primary medium of education, governance, commerce, media, religion, and public discourse. This paper explores how this linguistic hegemony took root during British colonisation and was further entrenched by post-independence state policies and elite attitudes that prefer the English over indigenous languages. The discussion begins by tracing the colonial foundation of Nigeria's linguistic hierarchy, highlighting how education policies, missionary efforts, and administrative systems systematically displaced indigenous languages. The analysis then moves to the postcolonial entrenchment of English as the language of power and prestige, with emphasis on its role in education, media, politics, and religious practice. The paper further interrogates the psychosocial implications of linguistic marginalisation, including identity crises, cultural alienation, and internalised inferiority complexes, especially among Nigerian youth. In response to these challenges, the paper presents a multi-pronged strategy for linguistic reclamation. It outlines critical pathways such as mother tongue education reform, legislative advocacy for language rights, community-driven revitalisation initiatives, and the use of digital and creative media to revalorise indigenous languages. Drawing on both local case studies and global best practices from multilingual societies like South Africa and New Zealand, the paper emphasises the urgent need for a linguistically inclusive national policy. Ultimately, the paper calls for decolonised linguistic future where indigenous languages are not relics of the past but vibrant instruments of identity, knowledge, and nation-building. This paper therefore advocates for collective action across governmental, educational, and community levels to restore Nigeria's linguistic sovereignty and cultural dignity.

Keywords: colonialism; linguistic decolonisation; linguistic marginalisation; linguistic slavery; Nigerian experience



1. Introduction

The British colonisation of Nigeria not only transformed the country's political and economic structures but also established lasting linguistic inequalities. English, introduced as the language of governance and schooling, became firmly embedded in the Nigerian society. Following the attainment of independence in 1960, English language retained its status as the official language and gradually spread across all sectors, including education, politics, business, media, religion, and entertainment. This excessive reliance on English language has resulted in what this paper refers to as "linguistic slavery"—a state in which the nation's own languages and cultural identity are suppressed in favour of a colonial tongue. Although Nigeria is politically independent, it remains linguistically dependent on the English language to the detriment of its indigenous languages and cultural heritage.

This paper critically examines the phenomenon of linguistic slavery within the Nigerian context. It explores how English language has maintained its dominance over indigenous languages, the sociopolitical structures that sustain this dominance, the psychosocial consequences of indigenous language decline and the efforts being made to reclaim Nigeria's linguistic heritage. Ultimately, the paper advocates for a decolonised linguistic future in which indigenous languages are positioned as essential instruments for education, cultural identity, and national development.

2. Theoretical framework: linguistic imperialism

Linguistic imperialism provides a powerful theoretical lens for examining the persistent dominance of English language in Nigeria and the resulting marginalisation of indigenous languages. Linguistic imperialism, as theorised by Phillipson (1992), offers a framework for understanding the global hierarchy of languages by examining why certain languages attain dominance, what structural and ideological forces sustain this dominance, and how language professionals contribute to or challenge these dynamics. It is often tied to historical processes of colonisation, globalisation, and cultural subjugation. It is not merely about language usage but about how language becomes a medium through which political, economic, and cultural hierarchies are maintained (Zeng, Ponce and Li, 2023). Phillipson (1992) argues that linguistic imperialism operates through institutions such as education, media, government, and international aid, which subtly or overtly prioritise one language over others. This prioritisation creates what he terms a "linguistic hierarchy," in which the dominant language (in this case, English) enjoys elevated status, economic utility, and cultural prestige, while indigenous languages are devalued, under-resourced, and seen as backward or irrelevant in modern life. This dynamic has been fully evident in Nigeria, where English is not only the language of administration and formal education but also the principal medium of social mobility, legal authority, and even national identity (Ucha, 2024).

In the Nigerian context, linguistic imperialism is deeply rooted in the colonial legacy. The British colonial administration institutionalised English as the language of governance, education, and commerce, while systematically undermining local languages (Bamgbose, 1991; Osisanwo, 2016). Post-independence policies continued this trend, often unintentionally reinforcing linguistic hierarchies by failing to adequately fund or standardise indigenous language education (Osisanwo, 2016). Linguistic imperialism also draws attention to the ideological dimensions of language policy (Zhang and Song, 2022). Language is not merely a tool for communication; it shapes thought, frames worldview, and constructs social realities. When English is positioned as the sole medium for expressing knowledge, conducting governance, or accessing justice, it subtly reinforces a worldview in which indigenous languages—and by extension, indigenous epistemologies—are viewed as inferior or inadequate. This creates a form of cultural alienation and internalised linguistic inferiority, in which speakers of local languages may begin to view their mother tongues as obstacles rather than assets (Abbas, 2019). Such psychosocial effects are central to the notion of linguistic slavery, which suggests not just external imposition, but internalised subordination.

3. Colonialism and the foundation of linguistic slavery

The use of the term "*linguistic slavery*" in this paper is a deliberate metaphor meant to capture the depth and persistence of Nigeria's dependency on the English language, decades after the end of formal colonial rule. While "*linguistic colonisation*" is often used to describe the imposition of a foreign language during the colonial era, "*linguistic slavery*" goes further to express a condition of continued subjugation, internalised inferiority, and loss of linguistic autonomy in the post-independence era. It reflects a state in which English language is not just a functional tool but has become a master language—governing education, governance, media, religion, and even social mobility—while indigenous languages are devalued, marginalised, and in many cases, facing extinction. This metaphor echoes the psychological and cultural bondage that persists when a nation adopts the language of its coloniser as the primary means of thought, expression, and official communication, often to the detriment of its native linguistic identity. In this context, Nigeria may be politically free, but it remains linguistically enslaved—tied to the linguistic apron strings of Britain, its former colonial master. The term thus aims to provoke critical reflection on the true extent of Nigeria's postcolonial freedom and to underscore the urgent need for linguistic decolonisation.

In the late 19th century, especially following the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, European powers formalised their domination of Africa by dividing the continent into zones of control. The British claimed the territory that would later become Nigeria, imposing their political, economic, and cultural frameworks. A key element of this colonisation was the introduction and entrenchment of the English language on the people. English language rapidly assumed dominance as the medium of administration, commerce, legal proceedings, and, most importantly, education (Akindele and Adegbite, 1999). The colonial government mandated the exclusive use of English language in all formal institutions, thereby pushing indigenous languages to the margins—limited to informal, household use and often burdened with social stigma (Bamgbose, 1991; Osisanwo, 2016).

In missionary schools, where many Nigerians first encountered formal education, English language was more than just the language of instruction—it was upheld as the benchmark for intellectual and moral superiority. Students were discouraged—and sometimes even punished—for speaking their native languages (Osisanwo, 2016). Indigenous languages were viewed as obstacles to progress, symbolising a primitive and uncivilised past. This created a deeply rooted linguistic hierarchy that elevated English language while devaluing local languages. As a result, a powerful psychological association took hold: English came to represent intelligence, progress, and modernity, whereas indigenous languages were linked to backwardness, inferiority, and stagnation (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). The impact of colonial language policies was profound and long-lasting. By the time Nigeria gained independence in 1960, English language was already deeply rooted as the language of the educated elite. Rather than reversing colonial linguistic frameworks, the post-independence era largely reinforced them—and in some instances, even intensified their effects. The new ruling class, having been schooled through the use of English language and influenced by colonial ideologies, saw little incentive to promote indigenous languages to equal footing. As a result, English language continued to dominate key domains such as the constitution, the legal system, higher education, and formal employment (Tihamiyu and Olaleye, 2014). Although the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2014) recommended using mother tongues in early childhood education, this policy has been poorly and inconsistently implemented (Ogunyemi and Bada, 2020).

This phenomenon is what scholars have described as linguistic imperialism—a form of cultural imperialism where the language of the coloniser persists in postcolonial societies as a tool of social, political, and economic exclusion (Phillipson, 1992). In Nigeria, linguistic imperialism manifests through the systemic prioritisation of English language across all spheres of public life. From job interviews and court proceedings to university admissions and political campaigns, English language is the default language of legitimacy and power. Even more troubling is the emergence of what can be described as a "linguistic caste system," resulting from Nigeria's ongoing dependence on English language. Proficiency in English language often grants individuals greater social standing, access to better opportunities, and heightened respect, while those who primarily speak indigenous languages are frequently relegated to lower social tiers. In this way, English language functions as a gatekeeper determining access to elite status by distinguishing those who belong from those who are left out (Turin, 2017). This dynamic is especially concerning in a country as linguistically rich as Nigeria, where over 500 indigenous languages are spoken (Eberhard et al., 2023). Each of these languages embodies a wealth of cultural heritage, including oral traditions, philosophical worldviews, and communal values. The continued marginalisation of these languages not only threatens linguistic diversity but also poses a serious risk to cultural preservation and collective identity. There is a growing trend among Nigerian parents—particularly in urban areas and among the middle and upper classes—to raise their children exclusively in English language. Many parents discourage or even forbid the use of indigenous languages at home, believing that fluency in English language will offer their children better life chances (Abbas, 2019). While this is understandable in a society where English language proficiency is often equated with educational success and career mobility, it also signifies a deeper internalisation of colonial values.

Linguistic slavery, then, is not just about the dominance of English language. It is about the ideological colonisation of the mind. It reflects a state in which a people, though politically independent, continue to operate under the linguistic and cultural systems of their former colonisers. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) famously argued, "The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised." Despite the recognition of these challenges, efforts to reverse linguistic subjugation have been minimal. Indigenous language policies remain underfunded and poorly implemented. There is little political will to institutionalise indigenous languages in governance or to support mother tongue education beyond rhetoric. This linguistic inertia ensures that the legacy of colonialism continues to shape Nigeria's national identity, educational system, and cultural landscape.

4. English as the language of power and prestige

In postcolonial Nigeria, the English language has transitioned from a tool of colonial domination to a widespread symbol of modernity, prestige, and upward social mobility. Its dominance extends across nearly every sector of Nigerian society—from education and politics to business, religion, and entertainment. This widespread usage has elevated English language beyond a mere tool of communication to a powerful gatekeeping mechanism that grants access to socioeconomic mobility, national visibility, and elite status.

Perhaps the most visible domain in which English language holds sway is the education system. From primary to tertiary levels, English is the primary language of instruction. Even though the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2014) recommends that children be taught in their mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment at the early childhood level, this provision is rarely implemented in practice. Most urban and even many rural schools begin instruction in English from the first year of schooling. Furthermore, all national examinations—such as the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME), and professional qualifying assessments—are conducted in English language. Proficiency in English language is not only required for passing these examinations but is also a key determinant of access to tertiary education and formal employment (Fakeye and Ogunyemi, 2017). This structural emphasis on English language has had profound implications for how Nigerians perceive language and intelligence. Mastery of English is often equated with intellectual ability, competence, and global relevance. Ucha (2024) observed that many Nigerians see knowledge of the English language as the only path to wealth, influence and power. On the other hand, inability to speak English fluently is frequently interpreted as a sign of illiteracy or lack of sophistication. This perception reinforces the status of English as the language of the educated elite and delegitimises indigenous languages as unworthy of serious intellectual or professional engagement.

The workplace further reinforces these dynamics. Government documents, business transactions, legal proceedings, and corporate communications are conducted almost exclusively in English language. To work in the civil service, multinational corporations, or the judiciary, a high command of English is a non-negotiable requirement. As such, English proficiency is directly tied to employment opportunities and upward mobility in the Nigerian job market. This situation has fostered a culture of linguistic assimilation, where individuals—especially from middle- and upper-class backgrounds—consciously abandon their mother tongues to achieve greater social capital through English. The English language also exerts significant influence over Nigeria's media and entertainment landscape. Most television and radio programmes, newspapers, digital publications, and social media content are primarily created in English language (Ajepe and Ademowo, 2016). When indigenous languages do appear, they are typically limited to humorous segments or minor, less prominent programming. In Nollywood—the country's thriving film industry—English and English-heavy code-switching dominate, particularly in films aimed at global audiences. While there are films produced in indigenous languages, they are frequently sidelined or regarded as less prestigious.

Nigerian music—especially Afrobeats and mainstream hip-hop—reflects a similar trend. Although the use of local languages like Yoruba, Pidgin English, and Igbo in lyrics is on the rise, many artists frequently code-switch and still prioritise English language as the primary mode of expression (Balogun & Oladayo, 2021). This blending often leans toward English in terms of grammar, expressions, and imagery, subtly reinforcing its role as the dominant and preferred language. Consequently, English is perceived not merely as a functional medium but as a symbol of artistic quality and international relevance. Religious institutions, especially Christian denominations, also mirror the prevailing linguistic hierarchy. Most church services, gospel songs, and religious literature are delivered primarily in English, a trend particularly dominant within Pentecostal and evangelical movements that cater to urban middle-class audiences. Although some congregations—especially within Catholic and mainline Protestant traditions—conduct worship in indigenous languages, these are often labeled as “local” or “traditional” and typically receive less media attention compared to English-speaking ministries (Ajepe and Ademowo, 2016). At the same time, indigenous spiritual systems, which depend heavily on native languages for chants, incantations, and oral narratives, continue to be sidelined and frequently dismissed as “pagan” or outdated. This linguistic stratification is especially evident among the younger generation. In many urban households, parents—despite being fluent in indigenous languages—choose to communicate primarily in English language, believing it is essential for their children's future success. Fearing that the use of mother tongues may hinder academic achievement or social mobility, they often discourage their use at home (Ucha, 2024). While this decision is understandable in context, it contributes to the gradual loss of native languages and weakens cultural identity. As a result, many children grow up unable to speak their ancestral languages, further widening the generational and cultural divide. Additionally, the widespread use of the term “vernacular” to describe indigenous languages reflects entrenched linguistic bias (Shittu and Acheoah, 2023). The word vernacular carries negative connotations, suggesting that such languages are crude, informal, or lacking in refinement. These attitudes foster internalised cultural inferiority among speakers of Nigerian languages, leading many to view their linguistic heritage as something shameful or obsolete.

In this context, linguistic slavery manifests not just as the presence of English language, but as the absence—or suppression—of indigenous languages in critical domains of national life. It thrives on the systemic elevation of English as the only acceptable medium of education, commerce, and culture, while simultaneously devaluing the languages that are closest to the people's identities and histories. The widespread elevation of the English language has also undermined and distorted Nigeria's sense of national identity and cohesion. In a multilingual nation like Nigeria, true national unity should be built on linguistic inclusivity and mutual respect. However, English language has become a divisive force, creating invisible but powerful lines between the English-speaking elite and the rest of the population. As long as indigenous languages remain institutionally marginalised, efforts at national integration and cultural preservation will remain hollow. To disrupt this cycle, it is not enough to merely acknowledge the historical roots of English language dominance. There must be a deliberate effort to reverse the ideological framework that associates English with success and native languages with failure. As we shall see in the next segment, this imbalance has psychological and social consequences that go far beyond communication—they shape how Nigerians see themselves, their communities, and their future.

5. The psychosocial consequences of linguistic slavery

Language is more than a tool for communication—it is a vessel of identity, culture, and worldview. When a language is lost or devalued, so too are the cultural nuances, values, philosophies, and historical memories embedded within it. In Nigeria, the long-standing dominance of English has not only reshaped how people speak but also how they perceive themselves, relate to their heritage, and transmit cultural values across generations. This section explores the deep psychosocial implications of what we have termed linguistic slavery, particularly focusing on identity formation, cultural alienation, intergenerational disconnect, and the erosion of national consciousness. At the heart of linguistic slavery lies a profound crisis of identity. Language is fundamental to the development of self-awareness and a sense of belonging within society. In traditional Nigerian communities, a person's identity was intrinsically linked to their ability to speak their mother tongue, interpret proverbs, engage in oral storytelling, and participate in culturally rooted rituals. However, as English has become the primary gateway to education, employment, and social recognition, these indigenous knowledge systems have been devalued—often regarded as outdated or merely optional. As a result, many young Nigerians now relate more closely to Western or globalised ideals than to their ethnic and cultural origins. Some even go so far as to anglicise their traditional names (Ajepe and Ademowo, 2016). While some may wear native attire on school cultural days or perform traditional songs during festivals, the deeper sense of cultural ownership that language fosters is frequently absent.

This identity dislocation is especially pronounced among urban youth. Many are raised in households where only English language is spoken and are schooled in institutions that favour English-medium instruction. Consequently, a significant number of these persons are unable to hold a fluent conversation in their native tongue. This phenomenon is no longer confined to major cities like Lagos or Abuja; it is increasingly observed even in previously homogeneous communities. The inability to speak one's ancestral language not only severs personal ties to cultural identity but also deepens the generational divide (Asadu, 2018). Grandparents—often the guardians of oral traditions—struggle to communicate meaningfully with their grandchildren, leading to emotional disconnect and the weakening of cultural transmission. The loss of language also signals the erosion of traditional values. Language activities like proverbs, idioms, folktales, and moonlight storytelling which were once rich sources of ethical guidance and collective wisdom are gradually fading from memory (Akujobi, 2019). These oral traditions played a central role in moral upbringing, instilling virtues such as respect, perseverance, honesty, and communal responsibility. In the absence of these values, many young Nigerians are growing up under the influence of Western media, capitalist individualism, and consumer-driven culture. This creates a cultural tension between inherited expectations and contemporary realities, often leaving the youth feeling unmoored and lacking clear direction.

Another psychological effect is the formation of a linguistic inferiority complex. The term "vernacular," which remains widely used in Nigerian schools to refer to indigenous languages, carries a negative implication, suggesting that these languages are inferior or lacking in refinement. Students who speak their native languages at home are often ridiculed or even punished in school, further entrenching the belief that these languages are inappropriate or shameful in formal contexts (Shittu and Acheoah, 2023). Over time, this stigma fosters internalised self-loathing and cultural embarrassment. Consequently, children begin to perceive their native language—and, by extension, their culture—as inferior or unimportant. Furthermore, linguistic slavery has cognitive and academic implications. Research has consistently shown that children learn best in their mother tongue, particularly in the early years of education. When children are taught in a second language they do not fully understand, they often struggle with comprehension, abstract thinking, and critical reasoning (Apatha and Ogunyemi, 2025, Ogunyemi, 2015). This educational disadvantage disproportionately affects children from rural or marginalised communities where English is not spoken at home. The imposition of English as the exclusive language of education thus reinforces systemic inequality and educational disparity. This structural imbalance not only hinders academic performance but also limits students' ability to relate educational content to real life experiences.

Emotionally, the loss of linguistic roots can lead to feelings of alienation and psychological fragmentation. Young people who are unable to communicate in their native language may feel like outsiders within their own communities. They are often excluded from traditional ceremonies, rites of passage, and communal dialogues where the indigenous language is the default mode of communication. This exclusion is not just symbolic—it has real consequences for one's sense of belonging and self-worth. Additionally, the growing detachment from indigenous languages and cultures contributes to a weakened national consciousness. Nigeria is a country of great ethnic and linguistic diversity, and this diversity should be a source of unity and strength. However, the elevation of English as the unifying language has ironically deepened divisions. Indigenous languages are often associated with ethnic loyalty, while English is portrayed as the neutral ground. But in reality, this "neutrality" functions to erase cultural specificity and create a homogenised national identity that lacks emotional depth. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) famously argued, the language of a people is the soul of their culture. When you kill the language, you kill the culture and, eventually, the nation's spiritual essence. The psychosocial toll of linguistic slavery is thus multifaceted. It fractures identity, undermines cultural confidence, disrupts generational continuity, and weakens national unity. Addressing these issues requires more than policy reform or curriculum revision—it calls for a cultural reawakening, one that repositions indigenous languages not as relics of the past but as vibrant tools for shaping the future.

6. Resisting linguistic slavery and reclaiming indigenous identity

Reversing the effects of linguistic slavery in Nigeria requires a proactive, multifaceted strategy that addresses the structural, cultural, and psychological foundations of language marginalisation. The journey to linguistic liberation must be deliberate and rooted in both institutional reforms and grassroots mobilisation. While the entrenchment of English in Nigerian society is deep, it is not irreversible. Around the world, formerly colonised nations have demonstrated that linguistic revitalisation is possible through sustained commitment to language planning, education, media engagement, and cultural pride. In Nigeria, efforts to resist linguistic slavery and reclaim indigenous identity can be categorised into five interrelated domains: (1) mother tongue education and curriculum reform, (2) policy advocacy and linguistic rights, (3) media and digital revitalisation, (4) community-driven cultural engagement, and (5) academic and intellectual investment in indigenous knowledge systems.

Mother tongue education and curriculum reform

The foundation for linguistic emancipation must be laid in the education system. UNESCO (2022) maintains that children educated in their mother tongue during early childhood show higher retention and better academic performance. Nigeria's National Policy on Education (FRN, 2014) already endorses the use of mother tongue as the language of instruction in the first three years of primary education. However, implementation has been haphazard and inconsistent due to lack of teacher training, instructional materials, and institutional will. To move forward, Nigeria must develop comprehensive curricula that support the teaching of indigenous languages—not only as subjects but as mediums of instruction. Textbooks should be produced in indigenous languages, and teacher education colleges must train educators to teach across various Nigerian languages. Furthermore, national examinations should include indigenous languages as core components, thereby enhancing

their perceived value and motivating students to learn them. The systematic neglect of Nigeria's indigenous languages in formal education systems has eroded their prestige. Reversing this trend requires deliberate curriculum redesign that integrates indigenous knowledge, stories, and pedagogies into mainstream education. Such integration would not only bolster language retention but also affirm cultural identities.

Policy advocacy and linguistic rights

Beyond educational reform, language revitalisation demands robust legal and policy frameworks. Nigeria's current language policy lacks enforceability and fails to guarantee equal status for indigenous languages in public life. This needs to change. Indigenous language rights must be enshrined in the constitution and protected by legislation that mandates linguistic inclusion in governance, media, education and public services. Examples from countries like South Africa and New Zealand are instructive. South Africa's constitution recognises eleven official languages and requires the state to take "practical and positive measures" to elevate the status and use of indigenous languages (South African Constitution, 1996). New Zealand's Māori Language Act (2016) affords Māori equal status with English language in the legal system and public broadcasting. These legal guarantees have enabled the revival of marginalised languages through public investment and institutional support.

Nigeria can draw from these models by establishing a National Commission for Indigenous Languages (NCIL) with the mandate to promote, preserve, and develop local languages. The NCIL suggested above would be a transformative institutional framework that moves beyond sporadic advocacy and fragmented policy efforts. Unlike the National Policy on Education or language bureaus embedded within broader ministries, the NCIL would be an independent statutory body with legal powers to influence language planning, resource allocation, and public accountability across all tiers of government. Language quotas in media, civil service examinations, and school admissions can ensure linguistic diversity is both represented and respected in national life. These steps are desirable because without legal instruments to protect linguistic rights, revitalisation efforts will remain symbolic and unsustainable.

Media and digital revitalisation

The media plays a critical role in shaping linguistic attitudes. In Nigeria, the dominance of English-language media has reinforced the perception that indigenous languages are unfit for modern discourse. However, the rise of digital platforms provides a unique opportunity to disrupt this narrative. Radio stations, television channels, YouTube creators, and social media influencers can serve as vehicles for indigenous language content. Broadcasting in local languages not only makes information more accessible but also affirms cultural identity. Nollywood, Nigeria's film industry, has made some strides in producing films in Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa. However, the volume remains low compared to English-language productions. Government incentives, such as grants and tax breaks for indigenous language content, could encourage broader participation.

Digital tools, such as mobile apps, podcasts, and e-learning platforms, can also support language learning and usage. Initiative like the Yoruba Names Project (www.yorubaname.com) has already begun this process by developing online dictionaries, language games, and translation tools. In addition, tech companies can support localisation by developing indigenous language interfaces, autocorrect tools, and AI-powered speech recognition in local dialects. This would not only boost linguistic visibility but also empower Nigerians to participate more confidently in the global digital landscape using their own indigenous languages.

Community-driven cultural engagement

While state and institutional reforms are crucial, language revitalisation must also be rooted in community life. Indigenous languages thrive where they are spoken, lived, and passed down through daily interaction. Community-driven initiatives, such as vernacular literacy programmes, intergenerational storytelling projects, and cultural festivals, are essential for restoring the vibrancy of local languages. Parents and elders should play a foundational role in this process. Families must be encouraged to speak indigenous languages at home and instil cultural pride in children from an early age. Schools can complement this effort by establishing language clubs, organising traditional music and drama competitions, as well as partner with community leaders to offer cultural immersion activities.

Academic and intellectual investment in indigenous languages in promoting indigenous languages

The academic sector must rise to the challenge of linguistic decolonisation. For too long, universities in Nigeria have treated indigenous languages as peripheral disciplines with limited academic value. This marginalisation mirrors colonial biases that favoured the English language as the sole medium of scholarly inquiry. To shift this paradigm, higher institutions must offer degree programmes in major Nigerian languages and integrate them across disciplines—including History, Philosophy, Political Science, and Law. Indigenous epistemologies, such as Yoruba Ifa divination systems or Igbo moral codes, should be studied not as folklore but as legitimate systems of knowledge. Journals, conferences, and research centres dedicated to indigenous languages and cultures must be adequately funded and elevated. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) emphasises that decolonising the mind begins with reclaiming the language of thought. When knowledge is produced, published, and consumed in indigenous languages, it affirms their intellectual worth and empowers local communities to define their realities. Nigerian scholars must also publish in local languages, translate global texts into indigenous tongues, and encourage multilingual academic exchanges.

7. Conclusion: towards a decolonised linguistic future

Linguistic slavery in Nigeria is not merely a remnant of colonialism—it is a living condition that continues to shape national identity, social mobility, and cultural consciousness. Although, Nigeria gained political independence in 1960, it is yet to fully liberate itself from the linguistic structures imposed by its colonial past. English, the language of the coloniser, continues to dominate education, governance, media, and intellectual discourse, while indigenous languages are systematically marginalised. This hierarchy of languages reinforces inequalities, alienates citizens from their cultural heritage, and perpetuates a sense of inferiority tied to one's native tongue. This study has shown that linguistic slavery is neither natural nor inevitable. It is a socially constructed phenomenon sustained by deliberate choices and policies—many of which can be unmade. The path toward linguistic decolonisation lies in recognising the intrinsic value of Nigeria's linguistic diversity and taking purposeful action to elevate indigenous languages to their rightful place in society. A decolonised linguistic future requires structural reforms in education. Children must be taught in their mother tongues to ensure not only better learning outcomes but also the preservation of cultural knowledge and values. Policies must go beyond symbolic recognition to ensure meaningful inclusion of indigenous languages in the legal system, the media, and public institutions. Nigeria must look to global models, such as the constitutional multilingualism of South Africa and the Māori revitalisation efforts of New Zealand, to chart a locally responsive but globally informed strategy.

Equally critical is the role of digital and creative media. The rise of Nollywood, Afrobeat, social media influencers, and mobile technology provides new platforms for indigenous expression. By embedding local languages in these spaces, Nigeria can make its languages relevant to a new generation while preserving the wisdom of the old. Grassroots efforts remain the heartbeat of any successful revitalisation. Community festivals, family traditions, school clubs, and local storytelling all offer daily opportunities for the use of indigenous languages. When people feel proud of their linguistic identity, they are more likely to transmit it to future generations. That pride must be nurtured by community leaders, educators, parents, and peers alike. Finally, Nigerian universities must serve as engines of intellectual decolonisation. They must take seriously the study, promotion, and dissemination of indigenous knowledge systems in indigenous languages. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) powerfully stated, language is the carrier of culture. To reclaim language is to reclaim thought, worldview, and identity. Linguistic slavery in Nigeria represents a deep-rooted challenge—but also an opportunity. An opportunity to reimagine national identity not through the lens of the coloniser's language, but through the vast, rich, and diverse linguistic heritage of its peoples. Reversing linguistic slavery will not happen overnight. It requires patience, policy, pedagogy, and pride. However, the rewards are immense: a more inclusive society, a culturally grounded education system, empowered communities, and a Nigeria that speaks not only in English, but in the voice of its ancestors and the dreams of its children.

Declarations:

- Originality statement: I, Kehinde Olufemi, OGUNYEMI confirm that this manuscript is original, has not been previously published, and is not under review elsewhere.
- Author approval statement: I, Kehinde Olufemi OGUNYEMI, confirm that author have read and approved the submitted manuscript.
- Conflict of interest disclosure: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this research. No financial, personal, or institutional relationships influenced the study's design, data collection, analysis, or interpretation. This disclosure affirms the objectivity and academic integrity of the work presented in this paper.
- Funding information: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. All expenses associated with the study were personally covered by the authors.
- Authors contributions: KO: conceptualisation, pilot systematic literature review, and synthesis, KO: methodology, data analysis. KO: review-editing and writing, original manuscript preparation.

References

- Abbas, S.Y., 2019. Parental beliefs regarding children native and English language acquisition: The case of Northern Nigeria as a multilingual context. Master's Dissertation, Eastern Mediterranean University, Gazimagusa, North Cyprus.
- Ajepe, I. and Ademowo, A.J., 2016. English language dominance and the fate of indigenous languages in Nigeria. *International Journal of History and Cultural Studies*, 2(4): 10-17. <https://doi.org/10.20431/2454-7654.0204002>
- Akindele, F. and Adegbite, W., 1999. *The sociology and politics of education in Nigeria: An introduction*. Ile-Ife: O.A.U. Press Ltd.
- Akujobi, O.S., 2019. The English language hegemony and sociolinguistic effects on indigenous Nigerian languages. *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development*, 2(2): 130-143.

- Apata, S.B. and Ogunyemi, K.O., 2025. Linguistics roots, economics fruits: How Indigenous Language Education fuels sustainable development in Nigeria. In Okebukola, A. Peter (ed.) *Cultural Odyssey: 20 Years of Implementation of UNESCO's 2005 Convention in Nigeria*. 291-304. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers.
- Asadu, O.F., 2018. Foreign languages and the problem of African identity. The Nigerian situation. *UJAH: Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 19(2): 167:181. <https://doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v19i2.9>
- Balogun, S. and Oladayo, M.M., 2021. Code-switching and code-mixing in the selected tracks of the Hip Hop music of Flavour and 9ice. *International Journal of English and Comparative Literary Studies*, 2(3): 55-70. <https://doi.org/10.47631/ijecls.v2i3.255>
- Bamgbose, A., 1991. *Language and the nation: The language question in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Eberhard, D.M., Simons, G.F. and Fennig, C.D. (Eds.), 2023. *Ethnologue: Languages of the world* (26th ed.). SIL International. Retrieved from <https://www.ethnologue.com>
- Fakeye, D.O. and Ogunyemi, K.O., 2017. Issues in language: The Nigerian perspective. In Falaye, F. V. and Adegbile, J. A. (eds) *Issues in curriculum and language education*. 197-208. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN), 2014. *National Policy on Education* (6th ed.). Lagos: Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) Press.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986. *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. London: James Currey.
- Ogunyemi, K.O., 2015. Mother tongue education in early childhood: A neglected Issue in Nigerian education. *Frontiers of Education and Management*, 3(1), 150-158.
- Ogunyemi, K.O. and Bada, A.E., 2020. Nigerian languages, ethnicity and formal education. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 20(3): 22-27.
- Osisanwo, A., 2016. A socio-historical appraisal of the implantation of English in Nigeria. *Historical Research Letter*, 36: 28-32
- Phillipson, R., 1992. *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford University Press.
- Shittu, F. and Acheoah, J.E., 2023. Nigerian languages in the tangled web of language attitudes. *Global Journal of Research in Education & Literature*, 3(4): 53-60.
- Tiamiyu, R.A. and Olaleye, G.A., 2014. Substituting the English language through the invigoration of Nigerian languages: The hypocrisy behind the scene. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 19(4): 75-80. <https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-19437580>
- Turin, M., 2017. Situating language, recognizing multilingualism: Linguistic identities and mother tongue attachment in Northeast India and the region. Routledge: India, pp 253-271. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315110295-15>
- Ucha, J.O., 2024. The effects of the English Language on the Nigerian culture. *International Journal of Public Administration (IJOPAD)*, 3(1): 51-60
- UNESCO, 2022. Why mother language-based education is essential. Retrieved from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org>
- Zeng, J., Ponce, A.R. and Li, Y., 2023. English linguistic neo-imperialism in the era of globalization: A conceptual viewpoint. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14: 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1149471>
- Zhang, Y. and Song, H., 2022. Linguistic imperialism and standard language ideology in an English textbook used in China. *Higher Education Studies*, 12(2): 112-125. <https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v12n2p112>