

Linguistic Factors in Intergroup Relations and Democratic Governance in Nigeria

Adegboye Adeyanju
The University of Abuja-Nigeria

1. Introduction

Linguists, particularly historical and comparative linguists, and historians ought to combine forces much more than they do now or would do (Kropp Dakubu 2006; Adeyanju 2019). As well, the historical and comparative linguist turns attention to the ways in which languages have influenced each other, particularly in the area of distribution of cultural goods. Interpretations of a historical and comparative linguist are liable to contradiction unless they know something of the historical background. And a historian's neglect of linguistics leads to even worse results. The same may be said of even the mutual interactions between linguistics, history, and religion. History, whether relating to political or military affairs, has been significantly influenced by both linguistics and religion. Arguing in this direction, Kropp Dakubu (2006: 52) opines that:

Language is always important to the historian, for the simple reason that by far the most important sources of historical knowledge are those transmitted through languages, whether as written documents or as oral testimony.

Kropp Dakubu *op. cit.*, however, seems to beg the point when she further stresses that perhaps the stronger motivation for historians forging a closer research collaboration with linguists lies in the fact that the historian needed to be "sensitive to the language in which (historical) sources are couched." Without the risk of overgeneralization, it would not be inappropriate to state that historians, of West Africa especially, are guilty of the "sins of limited research agenda" reflected in their lack of effective research collaboration with linguists, as well as their overconcentration of interests in only two modes of language; first, in language as the medium of historical sources, and second, in language as a phenomenon in cultural history. Historians today need to be challenged to overcome these limitations via a productive co-operation such as that of Dalby and Hair (1967).

Worthy of note as emphasized by Kropp Dakubu (2006: 57) is that the combined techniques of linguistics and history can shed light on:

...pre-historic settlement, pre-historic migration patterns, and certain aspects of culture, history and pre-history, particularly the sources and spread of diffused cultural items and practices. Less directly, such...shed light on past power relations, since the weak are usually influenced by the powerful, and not vice versa.

There is no doubt that in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Nigerian history there have always been linguistic interactions between Nigeria's peoples' groups. Further, we argue in this study that what today appear as mostly ethnically and culturally different Nigeria's peoples' groups are fragmentation from a once existing but now extinct monolithic "Nigerianoid," and we also assert the existence of a proto-language called by that name.

2. Understanding the overarching linguistic factors in intergroup relations in Nigeria

No doubt, Nigeria, with over 450 languages, is about the most multilingual country in Africa. Language is coterminous with ethnic grouping. To foster national integration and cohere the diverse ethnic nationalities in multilingual Nigeria, successive governments have encouraged Nigerians to learn one of the three ‘major’ languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba—the “Big Three/3B, Major 3/M3.” This is even enshrined in Section 55 of Nigeria’s 1999 constitution, as well as the National Policy on Education (1981, 2004), etc.; and consistently practiced as government policy. However, this constitutional provision intended to help manage the diversities of Nigerian peoples’ groups also paradoxically sadly encumbers the very process it was meant to aid. It introduces and maintains the categorisation of Nigerian peoples along two broad but defective axis of “majority versus minority” groups, culture and language speakers.

The direct implication of the sad categorization or labeling of Nigeria into the ‘Hausa and Moslem North’ and ‘Christian Yoruba and/or Igbo South’ as well as the attitude bred by this fallacious division is that it not only reflects the power configuration of the various geo-ethnic groups in the country but also demonstrates their desperate contestations, sometimes expressed violently by their cronies, for ‘national’ resource control and redistributive politics.

In terms of genetic classification as well as similarity in structure, many of Nigeria’s Indigenous languages (Figure 1: Linguistic map of Nigeria) could be said to be genetically related, although not many are really related. Impliedly there is a strong reflection of some assumed relatedness in origin, culture, history, migration, etc.

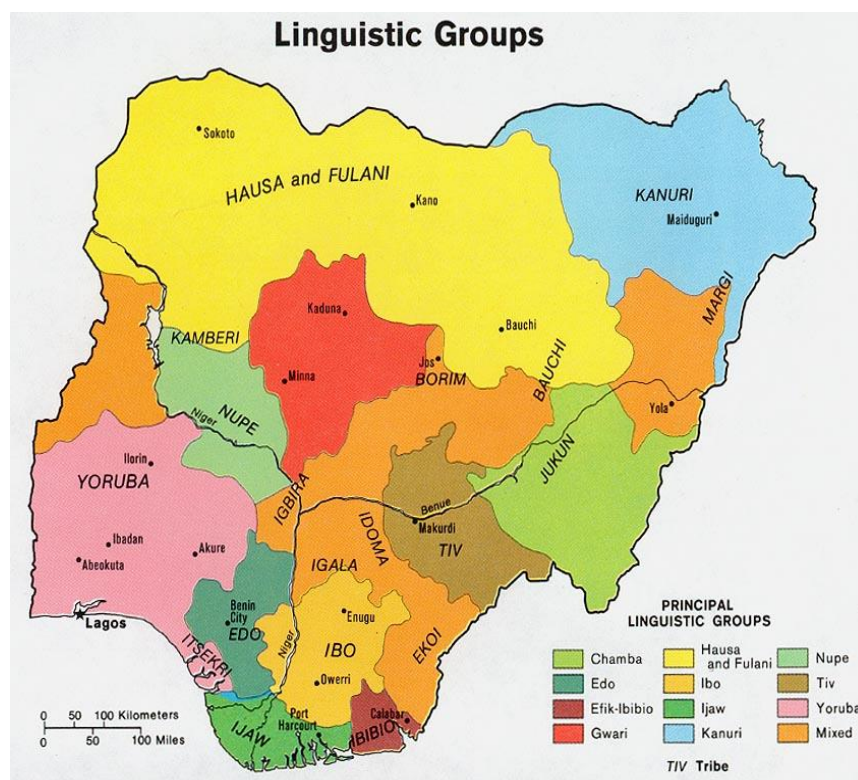


Figure 1: Nigeria’s Principal Linguistic Groups (Lewis, 2009)

Greenberg (1963) classifies languages of Africa as belonging to four language phyla or families: (i) the Niger-Kordofanian phylum: to this phylum belongs a group of 3 sub-

classified languages: Kwa, Adamawa and West Atlantic; (ii) the Afro-Asiatic phylum which accounts for about 29.5% of Indigenous Nigerian Indigenous-principal representative of the Afro-Asiatic phylum in Nigeria is Hausa; (iii) the Nilo-Saharan phylum (to which only about 0.5% of Nigerian languages belong): Kanuri, Dendi and Zabarma languages are the principal representatives of this phylum in Nigeria; and (iv) Khoisan (this has no representative Nigerian language). All Nigerian languages belong to three out of these four main language families of Africa: Niger-Kordofanian, Afro-Asiatic and Nilo-Saharan.

A majority of the ‘Nigerianoid’ or Niger-Kordofanian languages in Nigeria belong to the Kwa branch of the Niger-Kordofanian phylum. Languages such as Yoruba, Igbo, Oko-Osanyin, Edo, Igala, Idoma, Itsekiri and Nupe belong here (Aremo, 2009; Ballard, 1971). Yoruba is also spoken in the neighbouring countries of Benin and Togo. Another branch of the Niger-Kordofanian labelled Benue-Congo is instantiated by such languages as Ibibio, Efik, Ejagham and Tiv. Also included under Niger-Kordofanian are Chamba and other Jukunoid languages—these are from the Adamawa languages branch. Shuwa is from the West Atlantic languages branch also under the Niger-Kordofanian. Geographically located, the majority of the Niger-Kordofanian languages are in the southern parts of Nigeria while all Afro-Asiatic and Nilo-Saharan languages are located in the Northern part of Nigeria. Thus, we can, with reasonable accuracy, state that to Niger-Kordofanian languages belongs about 70% of Nigerian languages. These languages straddle about 29 states of Nigeria and the Federal Capital, Abuja.

The vast multifarious cognate reflexes are evidences of not only genetic relatedness, but also of culture-historical and somewhat of a common political homogeneity dating back to a far distant period. Sadly, this was not factored into either the political and/or social arrangements that attended colonialism nor even subsequently after independence from the management of power by the emergent political, social and economic elites. The issue of language(s), where it featured at all in that arrangement, was to polarize the peoples to guarantee their exploitation by the emergent power blocs.

Events in Nigeria, particularly since 1999, which have accentuated more divisive tendencies between ethnic groups, necessitate that a return should be made to exploring and exploiting their commonalities in order to foster national integration.

3. Perspectives on intergroup relations in Nigeria

Replete in pre-colonial African and especially Nigerian anthropological studies are a broad current of scholarship which locates intergroup relations based on the ethnic, religious and racial conflict perspective. Sadly, this has provided fodder for pre-colonial historiography (Ohiare 1987, Usman 1977). The argument here is that the frequent violent outbursts between groups were causative of the various ethnic, religious, and racial conflicts between them. Thus was bred the perspective which held that intergroup relations in pre-colonial Nigeria were driven by exploitation as well as the plunder of pagan tribes—and other subordinate and inferior groups—by Moslems and other super-ordinate, racially stronger groups.

A second perspective, historical in orientation, emerged shortly after the onset of colonial rule which explains intergroup relations in terms of the trade traffic between the diverse groups in pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria. It must be noted, however, that trade, whether in slaves in the delta region or in goods in the savannah, then, was not aligned only to tribal or religious affiliations of the various groups (Ohiare 1987, Allen & Thompson 1968).

The third perspective centres on assimilation or mutual relations of groups or their co-existence (Doki 2005, Okibe 1999). This view stresses the various forms of mutually beneficial relations amongst the various groups: cultural, economic, social, political and

religious. Indeed, this relationship predates colonialism. Groups have variously co-operated between themselves, and much is recorded about how they inter-married, shared common markets, partook in each other's festivals; that even practices of similar cultures are well engrained; the groups assisted each other in farming and defense, consulted each other on traditional, medical and religious matters, etc. All these were facilitated in and by language. Some groups even became homogenous, language-shifting to other group's linguistic code. With the advent of colonial rule, which imposed new administrative boundaries, some bifurcation occurred such that while there was increased sense of belongingness to one administrative unit—say Northern or Southern Nigeria—there was also an increased sense of particularised sense of belongingness or allegiance to a sub-group.

Emerging from this are four main questions:

- a. What are the implications of the changing patterns of intergroup relations in Nigeria?
- b. What have been the responses of the Nigerian state as well as the elite of the regional hegemony in fostering a strong and united Nigerian state?
- c. How may we describe the concomitant issue of the renewed agitation by these different Nigeria's people's groups to press for linguistic and social justice?
- d. What are the future policy directions, likely to be drawn from Nigeria's history, which can guarantee a more harmonious relationship between the various ethnic groups?

4. Using the Mazruian model for intergroup relations to explore Nigeria's sociolinguistic realities

Ali Mazrui, writing in the late 1960's, developed a model for studying and understanding political integration—or intergroup relations in developing Afro-Asian multilingual, multicultural and ethnically diffuse nations with acute need for balancing their diverse geo-ethnic characteristics. He isolates, in the order listed below, a four-stage process in national integration:

- i) The co-existence stage where groups merely co-habit a geographical/physical environment and require scant knowledge of each other.
- ii) The contact stage: this is the Mazruian second stage, where groups, having occupied a common or contiguous spatial environment and having interacted for some time, whether or not on the basis of co-operation and friendship, awaken to the realization that the shared geo-spatial environment imposes on them the need for some contact if they are to mutually compete and co-operate over commonly valued resources thereby present in that geographical space.
- iii) The third Mazruian stage is most appropriately labeled "the compromise stage," as only compromise, a discovery of and constant implementation of some core areas of compatibilities between them—a kind of "give and take" policy—can guarantee mutual co-existence within the geo-ethnic setting. This is because the people groups having had "dealings between groups [which] have become sufficiently complex, diverse and inter-dependent enough—(now necessarily further require to obligatorily engender) a climate of peaceful reconciliation between their conflicting interests."
- iv) The coalescence stage is the last Mazruian stage where he conceptualized that the various groups, having passed through preceding stages above, become socially and functionally integrated into one organic community. Mazrui argues that the inter-groups having coalesced or fused into one does not

mean the absence of personal or group interests. What the fusion effectively guarantees is the realization of and working towards a common destiny by the diverse groups.

This framework has implications both for language practice and policy as we shall establish shortly. The question “this epochal Mazruian work” has thrown up is: where do we feel persuaded to locate (a) pre-colonial Nigeria, (b) colonial Nigeria and (c) post-colonial Nigeria? Clearly, pre-colonial Nigeria can be said to have been located at Mazrui’s stage 1: the stage of co-existence, while Nigeria moved into stages 2 and 3 during the colonial period. At the various amalgamations the various groups and regions were brought into forceful contact and were administratively strung together with military force aided by both religion and trade. The diverse groups, now in contact with each other, were left with little choice except to compromise. Since Nigeria’s political independence in 1960, however, the efforts of various governments, military and/or civilian, have been geared towards moving Nigeria and its diverse groups to the coalescence stage. The three discernible strands or perspectives on Nigeria’s intergroup relations are:

- a) the ethnic, religious and racial conflict perspective;
- b) the trade perspective, and lastly;
- c) assimilation or mutually beneficial relations or co-existence perspective.

Extremely crucial, therefore, is a thorough-going understanding of the connection of the historiography of intergroup relations to present Nigerian sociolinguistic and political realities.

5. The response of the Nigerian state in fostering intergroup unity: Constitutional language provisions, ethnic or tribal relationships, politics and power in Nigeria

Nigeria, since inception, has been and is still a contiguous plurality of different ethnic, religious, political, and linguistic groups in search of cohesion. And various governments in Nigeria, starting from the colonial times and up to the present, have attempted to manage Nigeria's highly complex ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversities through various forms of federalist arrangements. What has made the picture complex is the development of a “triangle of national governance of evil” at the peak of which is the accentuated evil practice of the pre-colonial North/South divide of Nigeria, and at the base, on the left extreme side, is located the three (3) colonial regions or hegemons (with the majority groups dominating each region), and at the extreme right is placed the numerous minority ethnic groups’ micro-nationalism. In a way, it was to assuage this, for instance, that since 1996, the country has been composed of 36 states (19 North and 17 South) and the Federal Capital Territory as well as divided into 774 Local Government Areas (Nigeria’s 1999 National Constitution). Yet the agitation for creation of more states and local government areas has not abated. Generally, description of Nigeria, its peoples’ histories, population, culture, economy, religions, potentials, etc. is unfortunately usually referenced along the labels of “North” and “South.”

Table 1 below shows some of Nigeria’s demographics.

	North	South
Land Mass	786,754 km ²	197,022 km ²
Population	75,025,166	64,973,376
Federal Constituencies	196	164
States	19	17
Languages Spoken	479	167

Table 1: Nigeria information data

Language issues, as are ethnic or tribal affiliations, politics and religion in Nigeria, are often quite explosive and conflict ridden. There is a dearth of readily available and reliable statistics relating to the exact number of Nigerian languages, their spread, the number of speakers of each, or what percentage of the population they constitute, a consequence of past Nigerian censuses never having solicited questions and elicited responses on particular languages. Quite confounding is that Nigeria is a country with well over 250 distinct ethnic groups and a nation with over 646 languages (Ethnologue 2015 pegs the total number of Nigerian languages at 615), yet curiously Section 55 of the 1999 Federal Constitution categorises Nigerian peoples along the axis of ‘majority’ versus ‘minority’ groups.

Section 55 of Nigeria’s 1999 National Constitution states:

The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English and in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made therefor.

This section, paradoxically a rewording and an almost verbatim transplantation of Sections 51 and 53 of the 1979 and 1989 constitutions, it must be noted, confers on Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo languages the status of 3Bs, ‘Big Three’ or ‘major 3,’ 3Ms. By extension it privileges the Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo people above the other ethnic groups. It is a reflection of the constitution framers’ attitude of power configuration of the country and exhibits the direct implication for resource control and redistributive politics. Rather than accord all Nigerian languages, and by implication their cultures, equality before legislating those to be used in which domains such as education, entertainment, the national assembly etc., this ridiculously provocative constitutional provision, emblemizing an arrogance of power by political elites, attempts to distribute state power in Nigeria amongst certain majority and minority ethnic groups. Conveniently ignored by the constitution, it seems, are vast non-majority ethnic groups and their languages in Nigeria. Interpreted loosely, therefore, Section 55 grants linguistic and cultural hegemony to the Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo groups/tribes as only those languages recognised as the Indigenous ‘national’ languages for official communication. It also unwittingly restricts cultural (re)presentations of Nigerian heritage to only these tribes and language groups. Even amongst the 3Bs there are still ‘minorities.’

Yet none of the officially recognised 3Bs, ‘Big Three’ or ‘major 3,’ 3Ms (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo languages) have been able to truly serve the integrative roles the constitution envisaged due to segmental loyalties which would not favour their adoption as the national language. Thus, English has continued to be the incontrovertible agent for

cementing national unity in the nation. All the Indigenous languages in Nigeria play second fiddle to it.

So very important is the Mazruian framework (Mazrui 1969) that we now revert to it because of its implications both for language practice and policy. Prior to this present enterprise, in the Nigerian sociolinguistic literature this has sadly either been glossed over or completely not used in analyzing the language situation of Nigeria.

Table 2: Applying the Mazruian stages in Nigeria’s intergroup relations and language policy implementation

Mazruian stages of intergroup relations	Pre. col. lang. policy	Colonial lang. policy	Post-col. lang. policy
Stage 1: Co-existence stage	M+++	-----	-----
Stage 2: Contact stage	-----	B+++	M++
Stage 3: Compromise stage	-----	B+++	B+++
Stage 4: Coalescence stage	-----	M+++	B+++

Key: M+++ Shows greater dependence or intensity of monolingualism/monoculturalism
 B+++ Shows greater dependence or intensity of bilingualism/biculturalism
 M++ Shows less dependence or intensity of monolingualism/monoculturalism
 ----- Shows does not apply

The principle is that for Mazrui’s Stage 1, the co-existence stage, the group as the individual is not expected to learn nor even desire the use of the language of their contiguously located neighbour. Each person, as is group, is isolated. In sociolinguistics this would be the practice of extreme monolingualism and monoculturalism. A Stage 1 community predates any contact which colonialism—internal or external subjugation—foists on societies. In Stages 2 and 3, the contact stage and compromise stage, communities have experienced one form of contact or the other and have developed some form of compromise in their group relations. Most of such communities have come under some form of colonial rule. In terms of practice, the expectation in intergroup relations communication is accommodative bilingualism with resultant code-mixing, code-switching, or even language shifting. The individual—or ethnic group—is expected to internalize at least two languages: their mother tongue and at least one of the languages of their contiguously located neighbors. And at the coalescence stage, Stage 4, intergroup relations and communication would be characterised by a transition first to monolingualism and then bilingualism. Although section

51, 53 and 55 of the 1979, 1989 and 1999 constitutions privilege Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo people above the other ethnic groups and confers on them the status of national (3Bs, 'Big Three' or 'major 3,' 3Ms), it also reflects a certain response by the government to the requirements of the three levels of socio-politico-economic structure of Nigeria: Nigeria is one (1) a federation, divided into 774 local government areas; administratively made up of 36 states and Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory, and then constituted of six (6) geopolitical regions. By extension at the local government areas level (as in co-existence Stage 1) the group or individual can limitedly only function within their speech community, if they operate in monolingualism. However, at the federal or state level, and more so at the geopolitical region level (contact and compromise stages), it is practically impossible to operate monolingualism but bilingualism. A vast majority of Stages 2 and 3 speech communities are bilingual and bicultural. At the national level, the national question has implicit reference to national language, so strident calls have continued to be made for evolving a national language in Nigeria.

6. Conclusion

In our study to understand the underlying intergroup relationships amongst and between tribes in Nigeria, we explored one of the most productive approaches of using history and comparative linguistics. Since 1999 there has not only been an incremental rise in insurgencies, but also ethno-national forces have given expressions to wide scale violence.

As Nigeria trudges on in her democracy, she still would evolve a more functional policy on how to manage her intergroup relations and language diversities. Notwithstanding the civil war in Ethiopia since 2019, its constitution can yet inspire the framers of the Nigerian constitution in the amendments to the constitution. Written years before the current Nigeria 1999 constitution was written, the 1994 Ethiopian constitution is generally regarded as unparalleled and bold. The Ethiopian constitution boldly addresses many issues, amongst which are issues of governance, intergroup relations, supremacy of the constitution, human and democratic rights, language, nationality, etc. The Ethiopian 1994 constitution acknowledges the ethnic consciousness of Ethiopian peoples and provides for maintenance of the same.

We should examine the provision in the Ethiopian 1994 constitution for language diversities and nationality. These are intractable issues in Nigeria's constitutional developments and are part of the national question:

- i. On language diversities: the constitution declares that 'All Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal state recognition,' though 'Amharic shall be the working language of the Federal Government.' It however allows 'Members of the Federation' to 'by law determine their respective working languages,' and
- ii. Nationality: Article 33c guarantees Ethiopian nationality to those who already have it, as 'No Ethiopian national shall be deprived of his or her Ethiopian nationality against his or her will'. Similarly, Article 39 declares that 'Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession;' 'Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express, to develop and to preserve its history;' 'Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to a full measure of self-government which includes the right to establish institutions of government in the territory that it inhabits and to equitable representation in state and federal governments.' Specifically on the right to secession, according to the constitution, this comes into effect 'when a demand for secession has been approved

by two-thirds majority of the members of the legislative council of the Nation, Nationality or people concerned;’ When the Federal Government has organized a referendum which "must take place within three years from the time it received the concerned council's decision for secession;’ ‘When the demand for secession is supported by a majority vote in the referendum;’ ‘When the Federal Government will have transferred its powers to the Council of the Nation, Nationality and People who has voted to secede;’ and ‘When the division of assets is effected in a manner prescribed by law.’

The contour of national politics in Nigeria has sadly developed along the lines of strong ethno-regionalism with individual Nigerians defined by their religions and ethno-regional identities rather than national identities. Nigeria must successfully manage her multilingual, multi-religious and multicultural embroidery for her to advance beyond the growing spate of insurgencies in the land; for her to cohere, the country must also jettison the near rigid demarcation of the people into the:

- a. North/South divide;
- b. The sadly growing attraction for reverting to ‘colonial’ regions by its leaders, leading to the artificial creation of majority groups dominating each region, and to stem
- c. The relentless micro-nationalism of the minority ethnic groups in the country;

There is, therefore, a compelling need to constitutionally amend the following proviso:

- i. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, Chapter III states, on Citizenship, 25 (1) ‘The following persons are citizens of Nigeria by birth—namely: (a) person born in Nigeria after 1960, either of whose parents or any of whose grandparents belongs or belonged to a community indigenous to Nigeria; (b) person born in Nigeria after 1960 either of whose parents or any of whose grandparents is a citizen of Nigeria; and (c) person born outside Nigeria either of whose parents is a citizen of Nigeria.’

The Nigerian legal concept of citizenship as Paton Jr. (2003: 57) has argued ‘fosters communal violence and ethnic-religious conflict.’ Tribalism is enshrined in Nigeria’s constitution. The proviso ‘belongs or belonged to a community indigenous to Nigeria,’ is specious and does not solve the problem, but rather re-enforces the problem of ‘Who is a citizen in Nigeria?’ Therefore, we can conclude that in Nigeria ‘Citizenship equals Indigenes.’ Whereas an Indigene becomes one either through birth or ancestry and necessarily belongs to a geographically determined community; a settler leaves their original home to ‘settle’ in a new geographical location, often already inhabited by autochthonous tribes, hence, we conclude that all Nigerians can only be ‘Indigenous settlers’ and

- ii. As Paton further advocates, and we agree with him completely, to amend the clause in Section 25 (1) of Nigeria’s Constitution there is a need for a selective borrowing from a clause from Section 1 of the US Constitution. Hence Nigeria’s Constitution, Section 25 (1) would state: ‘All persons born or naturalized in the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of Nigeria and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; nor shall any State deprive any

person of life, liberty, property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.'

Since there is a felt strong need for an 'excellent' framework for describing and analysing the Nigeria's sociolinguistic realities to avoid the trap of current 'major-minor language' classification with its attendant negative connotations as well as to end or ameliorate the demonstrated official discrimination against the minority languages and their cultures evident in the tacit official support for the 'three major languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba' by successive governments, this proposal is a suggestion for policy redirection.

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