

# Oppressing the oppressed: the threats of Hausa and English to Nigeria's minority languages\*

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## *Abstract*

*In Nigeria, English is generally perceived as a dominant language. The dream of "one north" makes Hausa a lingua franca in northern Nigeria, with the potential of annihilating the over 200 indigenous languages spoken in that region. However, the increasing wave of ethnic consciousness as well as the ongoing agitations for the rights of minority languages have raised questions on the continued domination of minority languages by Hausa and English. Using data from a language-use questionnaire among northern and southern minority language speakers, the study shows that Hausa and English are fast replacing minority mother tongues in informal domains and situational contexts which are expected to be dominated by mother tongues.*

## **1. Introduction**

Language rights and minority interests have in recent time become subjects of attraction to the sociolinguist. The idea of being a minority is a social fact; a condition of subordination (Badru 2000: 258). Minority groups are often marginalized by the dominant group or groups within the society.

Minority ethnic groups in Nigeria are perceived as marginalized and exploited groups. This marginalization cuts across political, economic and cultural spheres of life. It is strongly believed that the exploitation of the minority groups' resources without corresponding infrastructural development is the cause of the unending tension, hostility, and ethnic crises, particularly in the Niger Delta areas. It is also believed that perceived political and cultural marginalization is the reason behind regular ethnic and religious conflicts in northern Nigeria. As if these forms of marginalization are not enough, minority groups in Nigeria are also oppressed

linguistically. This oppression is often reflected in the less attention accorded to minority languages in the National Language Policy on Education and the Constitution (cf. Federal Republic of Nigeria 1998 [1977], 1999). It is also reflected in the questions of reward patterns based on language use. But more importantly, it is reflected in the replacement of minority languages by the dominant ones.

Since language usage provides a reliable indicator of ethnic survival (Cartwright 1991: 219), the present study examines the extent to which the future survival of Nigeria's minority languages is threatened by the domineering influence of Hausa and English.

## **2. The threat of Hausa and English**

Threatened languages are languages which are endangered. Wurm (2003) distinguishes five levels of language endangerment — (1) potentially endangered languages (i.e. if the children start preferring the dominant language); (2) endangered languages (i.e. if the youngest speakers are young adults and only very few child speakers); (3) seriously endangered languages (i.e. if the youngest speakers are middle-aged or past middle age); (4) terminally endangered or moribund languages (i.e. if there are only a few elderly speakers left); and (5) dead languages (i.e. when there are no speakers left). While the situation of most southern minority languages reflects either (1) or (2) above, the situation of most northern minority languages reflects each of the five categories.

In Nigeria, as in many African countries, the major languages constitute a threat to the minority languages since speakers of the major languages are “the power brokers and decision makers” (Adegbija 2001: 286). It is also not surprising that dominant languages often threaten the nondominant ones to the verge of extinction because of their unequal status of dominance in terms of frequency of use, degree of proficiency, prestige and array of functions (cf. Wolff 2000: 330). Minority languages in Nigeria therefore are constantly under “stress” (Wolff 2002).

The question may be asked here: Why investigate only Hausa and English since Igbo and Yoruba are also major languages? We are concentrating on Hausa and English because Igbo and Yoruba do not directly threaten the existence of minority languages as much as those two languages do. Minority languages in the north are not under the threat of only Hausa or English, but under the threat of the two languages. Hausa and English are taught in most schools in the north, and it is often seen to be fashionable or a mark of modernity to be heard speaking English or Hausa (to a lesser extent), particularly among the youth. On the other

hand, minority languages in the south are under the threat of English (and Pidgin).

Some researchers have offered useful insights into the nature of the threat of Nigeria's minority languages. For instance, Ugwuoke (1999) identifies 117 northern minority languages with less than 5,000 speakers, which are in danger of disappearing as a result of the replacive roles of Hausa and English. Similarly, the researcher identifies 32 southern minority languages with less than 5,000 speakers, which are very likely to disappear following the overbearing influence of English (and Pidgin). Although the number of speakers does not necessarily determine loyalty or endangerment (Bamgbose 1991), the statistics provided here is meant to show how serious the problem is by giving us the idea of the number of languages and cultures likely to be lost.

Dawulung (1999: 35) raises even greater alarm than Ugwuoke on the threat of minority languages. According to him, "in Plateau state, all native languages can be said to be either endangered or disadvantaged." He blames this on the attitude of the native speakers, particularly the youth, who prefer to speak to one another in either English or Hausa. The situation is so serious that those who attempt "to speak their native language either speak it with Hausa or English accent or a concoction of English, Hausa and the native language" (1999: 35).

Dawulung's observation is not peculiar to Plateau state. Most minority languages in the north are under the threat of Hausa and English. In fact, in most parts of northern Nigeria, except perhaps Benue, Kogi, and Kwara states, many people, who were not originally Hausa and did not use the language as their first language have now become Hausa through "assimilation" (Adamu 1978). To this extent, Adamu sees Hausa as "a colonising language." The situation is made worse by the attitude of some Muslims from minority-language states, who erroneously believe that "speaking their language would divert them away from their Islamic faith and make them equal to 'pagan' (arna)" (Dawulung 1999: 35–36).

As other recent studies on endangerment (e.g. Haruna 2003; Kuju 1999: 41) have shown, in respect of Bauchi, Gombe, and some other northern states, several Hausa-speaking groups still maintain their ethnic identities but without convincing knowledge of their origin, that is, whether they were originally Hausa or from some other linguistic stock. What is certain is the fact that they now speak Hausa, which is fast replacing their original languages.

The threat of Hausa to the survival of minority languages in the north is more severe than that of English. The threat of English is mostly among the educated persons while that of Hausa includes both the educated and the uneducated persons. In some states, particularly Bauchi, Sokoto, and

Kebbi states, Hausa is the first and the only language of most children of those areas who have grown to hear Hausa spoken at home, in the market, and at school.

While Arabic and Hausa are the languages for Islamic worship, Hausa and English are the main languages of Christian worship and sermon. The commonly noticed practice is that non-Hausa pastors and clerics especially in Kaduna, Plateau, Nassarawa, Taraba, Adamawa, Gombe, Bauchi, Kebbi, and Bornu states often use Hausa in preaching to the members of their own ethnic group, occasionally with someone interpreting into the minority languages (cf. Kuju 1999: 50). This action aggravates the threat.

As Hausa is replacing the first languages of many children in the north, English is increasingly replacing the mother tongues of many Nigerian children from such southern minority states as Edo, Delta, Rivers, Bayelsa, Akwa Ibom and Cross River states. For example, Ohia (1998) observes with deep concern the diminishing interest of minority groups in Rivers state in their own languages, who now prefer English and Pidgin. Another investigation on Emai-speaking people of southern Nigeria by Schaefer and Egbokhare (1999) shows that English is propelling the abandonment of indigenous minority languages.

The review above seems to suggest that much work on language endangerment has appeared in literature in respect of Hausa in northern Nigeria and the replacement value of English in southern Nigeria. However, the specific case and the seriousness of threats posed by both Hausa and English in Nigeria seems less well understood. Also, those who have investigated, particularly the replacement of minority languages by Hausa, do not point to specific domains of influence which depict real threat. As part of a preliminary survey in Nigeria, a language-use questionnaire was administered to minority-language speakers in Plateau State (Northern Nigeria) and Rivers State (Southern Nigeria). The resulting data argue that the minority languages in Nigeria progressively continue to lose their functional values because of the increasing preference for Hausa and English. This preference value is leading to the speedy abandonment of minority languages in the “intimate” domains of life contrary to the expectation that low domains are more likely for the mother tongue (MT) while the high domains are more likely for the official language (cf. Fishman 1968; Greenfield 1972; Parasher 1980; Fasold 1984).

### **3. The data**

The data is a collection of answers to a questionnaire designed to assess the respondents’ language preference in various domains and contexts

such as home, family, oral communication, and buying and selling. The findings reveal that Hausa and English are taking over the intimate or informal domains where the minority-language MTs are expected to dominate.

### 3.1. *Survey instruments*

The instrument chosen for this survey is a 25-item questionnaire devised to measure the respondents' language preference in situational contexts listed above. These questions were planned to be answered by 200 people in each of the two states — Plateau and Rivers. To qualify as a respondent, one had to be either a student in a tertiary institution, a teacher in a secondary school or higher institution, a civil servant, or a journalist, from a minority-language group. Professional requirements ensured some level of education and awareness. In all, the analysis reflects the responses of the speakers of 50 different minority languages from the north and 27 different minority languages from the south.

The questionnaires were administered by research assistants, who resided in the states which they covered. A total of five languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, English, and Pidgin) were given as options. The label "Others" is assumed to represent the respondent's MT or any other language that corresponds to his/her choice.

### 3.2. *Apparent outline of language use*

As Tables 1–4 show, there is an obvious shift in language-use patterns from MTs to Hausa and English in informal situations.

Contrary to many past studies (e.g. Schmied 1991) showing the prominence of African MTs in oral communication, responses in this study show an evident shift to English among the northern minorities (74.2%) and among the southern minorities (65.8%), and to some degree to Hausa among the northern minorities (17.2%) and Pidgin among the southern minorities (26.1%). The rising value for Pidgin, particularly among the

Table 1. *Language for oral communication (in %)*<sup>1</sup>

	Hausa	Igbo	Yoruba	English	Pidgin	Others
Northern minorities	17.2	0	1.0	74.2	3.5	4.0
Southern minorities	0	1.5	0.5	65.8	26.1	6.0

southern minorities, gives some credence to Elugbe's (1994) insistence that Nigerian Pidgin is the dominant language used by 70% of the people (and more than any other language) in the former Bendel State (now Delta and Edo States), where several Edoid languages are used.

Table 2. *Language of buying and selling (in %)*

	Hausa	Igbo	Yoruba	English	Pidgin	Others
Northern minorities	30.8	0.5	0.5	42.9	23.7	1.5
Southern minorities	0.5	1.0	1.0	56.8	38.2	2.5

Although English or the MT could be used for transactions depending on the people involved, it appears that Hausa (30.8%), English (42.9%), and Pidgin (23.7%) in the north, and English (56.8%) and Pidgin (38.2%) in the south are now used among the minorities even when dealing with people of the same languages.

Table 3. *Language for home use (in %)<sup>2</sup>*

	Hausa	Igbo	Yoruba	English	Pidgin	Others
Northern minorities	56.6	0.5	0.5	18.2	4.5	19.7
Southern minorities	0	9.5	0	38.7	24.1	27.6

Table 3 shows a high replacing value for Hausa (56.6%) and, to a lesser extent, English (18.2%) in the home domain among northern minority language speakers. In the south, responses show a significant replacing rate for English (38.7%) and Pidgin (24.1%) among southern minority-language speakers.

Table 4. *Language of discussion with family members (in %)*

	Hausa	Igbo	Yoruba	English	Pidgin	Others
Northern minorities	28.3	0	0.5	33.8	4.0	33.3
Southern minorities	1.0	9.5	1.5	35.7	19.1	33.2

It is expected, as Igboanusi (2002) has indicated, that discussions, conversations, or meetings with family members in Nigeria are very frequently conducted in the MTs except where ethnically mixed marriages are involved. However, responses above show that Hausa (28.3%) and English (33.8%) in the north, and English (35.7%) and Pidgin (19.1%) in the south are already competing to displace the MTs in the family domain.

#### **4. Implications of linguistic domination**

There is nothing wrong with the spread and expansion of Hausa and English in Nigeria. But spread does not only entail personal loss but also social dislocation on the part of the recipient (Fishman 1989: 390). Language loss is “a culturally and intellectually catastrophic matter” (Newman 2003).

The domination of minority languages by Hausa and English may further alienate the minority-language speakers from their linguistic and cultural values in favor of the values of the dominating languages. In this regard, language shift may lead to the forsaking of the culture and values of one’s group’s forefathers (cf. Nettle and Romaine 2000).

The marginalization of minority groups in Nigeria is capable of giving children the impression that societal rewards are limited only to those who are members of a dominant language and culture. This impression has serious implications for the survival of minority languages and cultures.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Social, political, and economic pressures are conspiring to eliminate the languages of smaller communities (Heine and Nurse 2000: 6). In Africa, these languages are being eliminated because they have lost their functions. Worldwide, there is a growing awareness of the need to document endangered languages before they finally die. It is not likely that this threat can be stopped, especially in a place like Nigeria, given the sociolinguistic circumstances and the fact that there is no concerted effort at rescuing the minority languages. It is also not likely that their death can be avoided given the sociopolitical variables in the country. Any turn of event in the positive direction will depend on the change of attitude by the speakers of minority languages, at least, to use their languages in certain domains. Otherwise, the only alternative left for researchers is to urgently document these languages for intellectual gains before we lose them.

The linguistic minority groups are consciously aware of the threat to the survival of their languages. They are, however, unable to influence the destiny of their languages because of the practical reality of the linguistic situation in Nigeria, which tends to favor English and the major languages (such as Hausa). The speakers of minority languages do not seem prepared to allow their languages to die; but they also desire the benefits associated with the mastery of English (in the south) and English and Hausa (in the north).

The questions that should form the basis of further discussion are: is Hausa really “a language of domestic imperialism,” as Fakuade (1999) has asserted? Or is it “a colonising language,” as Adamu (1978) has noted? Or is it an “assimilating language,” as several past studies seem to suggest? How do Nigerians perceive the dominance of English?

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## Notes

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1. The use of oral communication is in contrast to the use of language for writing, which is clearly known to be dominated by English.
  2. Language for home use is here restricted to the exchange of pleasantries, greetings, jokes, etc., while language of discussion with family members is used in the context of meetings, discussions, and conversations with family members.

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