

## **Multilingualism in Nigeria: The Example of Rivers State**

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### **0. Introduction**

I am grateful to the organizers of this seminar for asking me to give a talk on multilingualism in Nigeria. In what follows, I present a sketch of the linguistic situation in Nigeria, especially in Rivers State. The linguistic situation in Rivers State is particularly interesting given that no less than twenty indigenous languages are spoken in the State, and that no less than ten ethnic groups are represented in the State. The paper is organized into four sections. Section 1 gives an overview of the linguistic situation in Nigeria; section 2 takes a look at the linguistic situation in Rivers State; section 3 examines multilingualism and language policy in Nigeria, while section 4 is the conclusion.

### **1. Linguistic Situation in Nigeria: An Overview**

Nigeria is a West African black nation with a population of about 120 million people. It covers an area of 923,766 square kilometers, with over 200 different ethnic groups. Presently, the country is politically composed of 36 States and Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory (see Fig. 1). It is estimated that over 400 languages are spoken in Nigeria (cf. Crozier and Blench (1992), Grimes (2000), Heine and Nurse (2000)). Three language phyla, of the four phyla (Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, Afro-Asiatic, Khoisan) to which African languages are grouped, are represented in Nigeria. These language phyla are Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, and Afro-Asiatic.



Fig. 1. Map of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (taken from the Website of Embassy of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Washington DC)

Out of the more than 400 languages spoken in the country, only three so-called major languages are accorded recognition as indigenous national languages, while more than 390 are labeled minor<sup>1</sup> languages. The three indigenous national languages are Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba. English, which is also one of the languages spoken in the country, an inheritance from Britain, its colonizer, is accorded the status of official language.

The three national languages, which give an unfortunate, superficial impression to the one who is unfamiliar with the linguistic terrain of Nigeria, tend to suggest that the country is geo-linguistically divided into three areas with Hausa spoken in the North, Yoruba in the West (and South-West), and Igbo in the East (and South-East). But this will be a gross misconception and misrepresentation of what obtains in reality, as the country is dotted with languages (see Fig. 2).

1. 'Minor' is to be understood in the sense of relative number of speakers, i.e. the speakers of a given minor language are fewer than those who speak any one of the major languages. Grimes (2000) puts the population of Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba speakers at 18, 000,000, 18, 525, 000, and 18, 850,000 respectively.

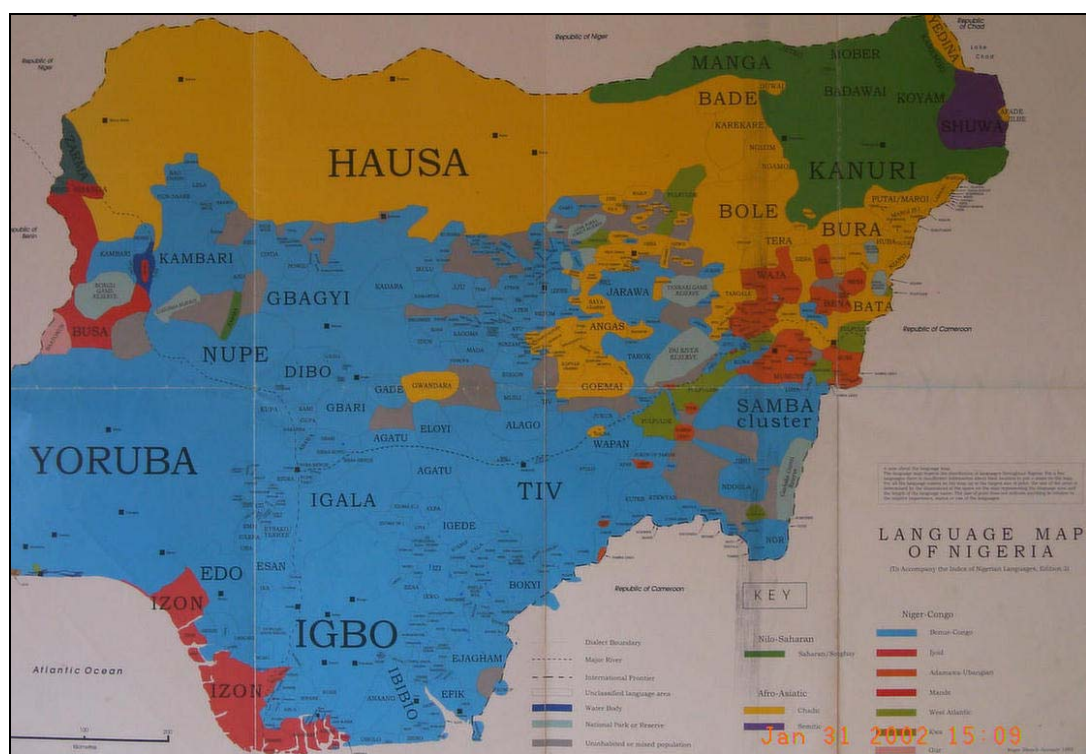


Fig. 2. Language Map of Nigeria (Blench 1993)

The linguistic situation in Nigeria is such that in many states of the federation, more than one language is spoken or used (see Fig. 3). Although Fig. 3 does not deal with (total number of) languages spoken in each state, it does provide some insight into the linguistic situation in some states of the federation. That only one language (Kolokuma) is listed against Bayelsa State, for instance, as language of the media, it is not to say or suppose that only one language is spoken in the state. Other languages that are spoken in Bayelsa State include, Biseni, Epie-Atisa, Kolo, Mini, Nembe, Oruma, and Ogbia. Cases also exist whereby more than one language is spoken in some local government areas (LGA) of the federation. In Degema LGA of Rivers State, for example, as many as four languages (Bille, Degema, Kalabari, and Ogbionuagum) are spoken. Thus multilingualism exists at the Federal, State, and LGA levels. Multilingualism at the federal level is seen in the fact that recognition is accorded to four languages (English, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba) (see the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (hereafter Constitution), Chapter V, section 55); at the state level multilingualism is clearly depicted in the media languages for each state as shown in Fig. 3 (See, for instance, Adamawa, Akwa-Ibom, Delta, Kogi, Plateau, Rivers, and Yobe States). The situation in Degema illustrates multilingualism at the LGA level.

State	Language(s)
Abia	Igbo (Ibibio)
Adamawa	Hausa, Fulfulde, Bachama, Mbula, Gude, Lunguda, Kanakuru, Yandand, Batta, Highi, Kilba, Bura, Yungur
Akwa-Ibom	Ibibio, Annang, Oron, Mbe, Okobo, HuMbuno, Eket, Andoni (Obolo)
Anambra	Igbo (Igala)
Bauchi	Hausa, Fulfulde, (Karikari)
Bayelsa	Kolokuma (Izon)
Benue	Tiv, Idoma, Iggede
Borno	Hausa, Kanuri, Fulfulde, Margi, Schwa, Babur
Cross River	Efik, Ejagham, Bekwara
Delta	Enuani, Ika, Ndokwa, Okpe, Urhobo, Isekiri, Isoko, Ijo, Delta Pidgin
Ebonyi	Igbo
Edo	Edo (Bini), Esan, Esako, Okpameri, Owan
Ekiti	Yoruba
Enugu	Igbo (Igala)
Gombe	Hausa
Imo	Igbo
Jigawa	Hausa
Kaduna	Hausa
Kano	Hausa
Katsina	Hausa
Kebbi	Hausa, Fulfulde, (Zabaramanchi)
Kogi	Yoruba, Ebira, Bassa, Igala, Igbira-Koto, Basankomo, (Kakanda, Oworo)
Kwara	Yoruba, Nupe, Baruteen, (Hausa)
Lagos	Yoruba, Igun
Nassarawa	Hausa
Niger	Hausa, Nupe, Gbagi, (Gwari), Kambari, Kamuku
Ogun	Yoruba
Ondo	Yoruba, Egberi (a dialect of Izon)
Osun	Yoruba
Oyo	Yoruba
Plateau	Berom, Ngas, Tarok, Mwahavul, Goemai, Eggon, Borghan (Hausa) (Fulfulde in preaching)
Rivers	Ikwere, Kalabari, Kana, Port Harcourt Pidgin (Special English)
Sokoto	Hausa, Fulfulde
Taraba	Hausa, Fulfulde, Mumuye, Junkun
Yobe	Hausa, Fulfulde, Kanuri, Bolewa, Badenchi, Karikari
Zamfara	Hausa

Fig. 3. States of Nigeria and Languages of the Media (adapted from Emenanjo 1995)

Linguistic diversity in Nigeria has occasioned widespread bilingualism and multilingualism. Some people in the country speak at least one language in addition to their mother tongues; some speak as many as four; still some speak more than four languages. Wolff (2000:316) cites a UNESCO document prepared for the Intergovernmental Conference on Language Policies in Africa in which it is noted for Nigeria that

... the number of languages spoken by each of the subjects of the speech communities studied range from two to five as follows: 60 per cent of the subjects spoke two languages; 30 per cent three; and 10 per cent over four languages.

The present writer speaks English in addition to his mother tongue Degema. His dad, in addition to Degema, speaks English, Kalabari, Kirike, (and French).

Code-switching (the complete change from one language or code to another within the same conversational context by the same speaker) and code-mixing<sup>2</sup> (the use of two or more languages or codes interchangeably in a given conversational context by the same speaker) are common in the speech of Nigerian bilinguals and multilinguals.

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2. Some general factors that have been identified as giving rise to choice of language or code are the multilingual repertoires of speakers, degree of competence in the languages used, social setting of communication, topic of conversation, social status of speakers, number and identity of speakers, etc. (see Wolff 2000:317f.).

## 2. The Linguistic Situation in Rivers State

Rivers State is located in the Southern part of Nigeria (see location of Rivers State on Fig. 1). The State has a population of about 3.5 million people. Rivers State is representative of the linguistic complexity of the Nigerian nation. There are 22 indigenous languages<sup>3</sup> scattered across the 23 Local Government Areas of the State. In addition to these indigenous languages, English and Pidgin are also spoken in the State.

Local Government Area	Language(s) Spoken
Abua/Odual	Abuan, Odual
Ahoada East	Ekpeye
Ahoada West	Engenni, Ekpeye
Akuku-Toru	Kalabari
Andoni	Obolo
Asari-Toru	Kalabari
Bonny	Ibani
Degema	Bille, Degema, Kalabari, Ogbronuagum
Eleme	Eleme
Emohua	Ikwerre
Etche	Echie
Gokana	Gokana (Bodo, Bomu, Dere, Kibangha)
Ikwerre	Ikwerre
Khana	Kana (Baan-Ogoi)
Obio/Akpor	Ikwerre
Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni	Egbema, Ndoni, Ogbah
Ogu/Bolo	Kirike
Okrika	Kirike
Omumma	Echie
Opobo/Nkoro	Ibani, Igbo, Nkoro
Oyigbo	Igbo <sup>4</sup> (Ndoki)
Port Harcourt	Ikwerre, Kirike, Obulom
Tai	Tee

Fig. 4. Local Government Areas of Rivers States and Indigenous Language(s) Spoken

3. I am grateful to Kay Williamson, Misweite E. Kari, Amenya Wokoma, and Nebilia Kari for updated information on the local governments and languages of Rivers State.

4. Although Igbo is listed in Fig. 4 as one of the languages spoken in the State, it is not recognized as one of the languages of the State, for political reasons.



Fig. 4 shows that in the majority of LGAs only one local language is spoken (see for example Ahoada East, Akuku-Toru, and Andoni where Ekpeye, Kalabari, and Obolo respectively are spoken). In some cases one language is spoken in two or more LGAs. In Emohua, Ikwerre, and Obio/Akpor LGAs, for instance, Ikwerre is spoken; Kalabari is spoken in Akuku-Toru and Asari-Toru LGAs, and in Etche and Omuma LGAs, Echie is spoken. Interestingly, in some LGAs two or more languages are spoken. In Abua/Odual and Ahoada West LGAs, two languages are spoken; in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni, Opobo/Nkoro, and Port Harcourt LGAs, three languages are spoken. The LGA where the highest number of languages is spoken is Degema. Degema LGA boasts four languages (Bille, Degema, Kalabari, and Ogbronuagum).

It is sad to note that most of the languages of Rivers State are confined only to the LGAs or communities in which they are spoken. As Afiesimama (1995:362) notes:

The indigenous Rivers State languages are not very much used outside the area where they are spoken. In Port Harcourt, the State capital and the only large town, the local languages are used mainly for cultural displays and in private domains...

Again, unlike Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba that are widely spoken in Sokoto, Anambra, and Ogun States respectively, no one language of Rivers State has such dominance. Afiesimama (1995:362) points out that:

None of these languages is spoken by up to one million people and there does not seem to be any dominant indigenous language in Rivers State in the way that Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are dominant and accepted in Kano, Imo and Oyo States respectively. There is no single indigenous language which can be used in addressing the people, unlike the three states mentioned above.

## 2.1. Language Use in Rivers State

We have already noted that most of the indigenous languages of Rivers State are confined to the LGAs or communities in which they are spoken. This situation notwithstanding, many Rivers people are bilinguals. Some are multilinguals, speaking three, four or more languages. Again, although we have mentioned that no single indigenous language in Rivers State is dominant like Hausa, Igbo, or Yoruba in the states mentioned above, a few languages are used at the state level in radio broadcasts. These languages are Ikwerre, Kalabari, and Kana. Two probable factors that played a key role in the status accorded these languages by the State Government are politics and population. We shall, however, not discuss these factors here.

Non-indigenous<sup>5</sup> languages that are also used in radio broadcasts are English and Pidgin, which is sometimes referred to as “Special English” or “Pidgin English”.

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5. ‘Non-indigenous’ is used in this paper to qualify any language spoken in Nigeria that does not fall within any of the language groups into which Nigerian languages are classified. It is also used here to qualify any language that is a hybrid.

English is used in radio broadcasts by virtue of the fact that it is the official language of the nation, and the language of education. Pidgin, though not encouraged to be used in education, is used in the media for the fact that many people (educated and non-educated) in the State understand and speak it. It is a language that is spoken across LGAs, although its impact is mostly felt in Port Harcourt. Most children in Port Harcourt understand and speak Pidgin more than they understand and speak English or any of the local languages of the State. In fact, Pidgin is a language that is understood and spoken not only in Rivers State but also in every nook and cranny in Nigeria. In spite of its low status, the communicative import of Pidgin cannot be ignored.

Except the languages that are used in the media, many local languages in the State ‘... are used mainly for ecclesiastical purposes and primary education. No local language newspaper or magazine with any wide circulation exist in the State’ (Afiesimama 1995:362).

### **3. Multilingualism and Language Policy in Nigeria**

The multilingual nature of the Nigerian society does not permit the use of a single indigenous language in government or education across the nation. Any attempt to do so will certainly be met with resistance. Nigerians will prefer that English be used at all levels of governance or education (as English is seen not only as the official language but also as a neutral language) rather than concede to the use of any one of the indigenous languages across the country. The 1999 Constitution approves of the use of three major indigenous languages in government, in addition to English, at the federal level. This is in recognition of the contention that the choice of any one of the three major indigenous languages would generate. Except English, the Constitution is not rigid as regards which language or languages that state governments should use in the conduct of their businesses. It leaves the choice open to state governments to decide which language or languages that are spoken in the state to use in their day-to-day businesses (see Chapter V, section 97 of the Constitution).

Like the Constitution, the National policy on Education (NPE) encourages bi- and multilingualism. In Section 1, subsection 8, the NPE encourages children to learn one or more of the three major languages in Nigeria, namely, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba other than their mother tongues, in the interest of national unity. The policy makes provision for the use of the mother tongue in the first three years of primary education.<sup>6</sup>

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6. We shall not concern ourselves with the implementation of this policy. Suffice it to say that in many multilingual urban areas the policy has not been successful. Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State, is a case in point.



The Rivers Readers Project, a project commissioned by the Rivers State Government, produced readers for over twenty indigenous languages of Rivers State in the late 1970s. One of the aims of the Project in producing readers for Rivers State languages was to enable children to learn to read in their own language before going on to English (Williamson 1976). Although it is not explicitly stated that the multilingual nature of the State was partly responsible for the production of as many readers as possible for the indigenous languages, it is implicit in the decision of the State Government. It is obvious that the State Government would have met stiff resistance should it have decided to produce, say, one reader for use in schools in all the communities that made up the State at that time.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

It should be clear from what we have presented so far that Nigeria is not a nation where only three languages (Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba) are spoken. These languages are among the more than 400 languages spoken in the country. The aforementioned three languages happen to be the most prominent languages in the country because of the population of their speakers, and the national recognition accorded them by the federal government. We noted that some people in Nigeria speak two, three, four or more languages, in addition to their mother tongues, because of the complex linguistic terrain of the country. Also pointed out is the fact that multilingualism exists at the federal, state, and local government levels. Rivers State in particular is noted as having 22 indigenous languages plus English and Pidgin spoken in it. It is further noted that within Rivers State, as many as four languages are spoken in Degema LGA. Multilingualism is recognized at federal and state levels. The 1999 Constitution and the National Policy on Education are advocates of bi- and multilingualism. Sadly enough, words have not always been matched with deeds.

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7. The communities that constitute the present Bayelsa State were part of Rivers State before the creation of Bayelsa State in 1996.

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