

# GLOBALIZATION AND LANGUAGE EXTINCTION

By

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## **Abstract**

The spread of English Language worldwide is a threat not only to minority languages that have not found a way of being preserved, but also to linguistic diversity globally. Whereas the major languages in Nigeria, as is the case with their counterparts worldwide, are not experiencing similar threats because the critical mass of their speakers is not widely dispersed, for most minority Languages, the critical mass is not intact, but dispersed in pursuit of greener pastures and the children of the migrant population are elsewhere out of home speaking English as their first language and abandoning their mother tongue due to lack of immediate speakers of it. The arguments of this paper are that there is a natural law element as well as the language policy element to the effects of globalization on minority languages. It is a position paper which concludes that there are natural causes of languages death which no man has control over, like the death of its speakers, but there are also the political policy and human actions that cause language death. The latter is preventable and should be curbed. The paper suggests that appropriate measures should be taken to revitalize and preserve all languages under the threat of extinction.

**Keywords:** Language, Extinction, Globalization

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## **Introduction**

UNESCO'S World Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing (2001) estimates that about 50% of languages may be in various degrees of endangerment which might lead to their eventual extinction. Trends in the globalization of English as reported by various scholars (Crystal, 2000; Cornell University, 2014 & Maikanti et al, 2021) have continued to alarm the world that while the English-speaking population has grown to include non-native speakers worldwide, there is a large number of languages that are being spoken by fewer and fewer people. These languages whose population of speakers is diminishing are in danger of going extinct should the native speakers all die in the near future without any form of preserving the languages or featuring them frequently in popular domains of use.

The paper begins with by examining the concept of globalization; discusses language extinction where-in it identified 12 extinct languages in Nigeria from the works of Nobody (2014) and Omotolani (2018);

identifies causes of language endangerment and extinction, outlines factors that prevent language death; and draws the conclusion.

## **The Concept of Globalization**

Globalization as a concept in this paper is limited to the spread and role of English as a global language and its attendant effects on other languages, especially the minority languages whose role in the lives of their native speakers has either been substituted, is being substituted or is about to be being substituted.

Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century Modern English started to spread globally due pre-dominantly to the influence of the British Empire and the United States of America (USA) whose diverse printed and electronic media, dominated the world, making English to become the leading language of international discourse and a lingua franca.

In the light of this perspective, English is in several African countries including Nigeria which are former British colonies, become the official language and a lingua franca among the large multi-cultural

and multi-lingual communities.

Kubota (2001) examines globalization from the sociolinguistic point of view and explain how the role of English has engendered the entrenchment of Anglo-American culture over a sizeable population globally.

Kubota's view is in sync with that of Smith (2000) who maintains that globalization began in the West, and it exists potentially as their ideas, ideologies, values and lifestyles that are promoted and evangelized worldwide. According to him, the dominant culture tends to supersede all others. This implies that the language of globalization suppresses the minor languages in a multilingual community to which English has spread and become the *linguae francae*.

Bravlaskey (2000) asserts that one of the areas that globalization has exercised some pervading influence in some communities in the world is the shift in heightened interest from other languages to English language Education worldwide. This accounts for why many education institutions in the world have adopted a minimum requirement in English proficiency or have included the teaching of the subject in their curricula.

Whether this is true or false, the shift is being propelled by, according to Youngman (2000), the fact that there is an assumption that the values and ideologies of the "Global North" will provide a frame work for a new knowledge economics of the developing "Global South"

Smith (2000) argues that the negative impact of globalization such as misrepresentation, stereotyping and the risk of loss of cultural property rights (including linguistic diversity) are the consequences of unmonitored access brought about by globalization. Fishman (2001) as cited, in Maikanti, Chukwu, Odibah, and Ogu (2021) describe the linguistic situation of English as both a consequences and a contributor to globalization. Fishman's observations is made in view of how globalization can share information about cultural and linguistic diversities and at the same time make use of

English language and destroy the cultural and linguistic diversities through language shift and the eventual disuse of African indigenous languages.

Awonusi (2006) and Dega (2015) consider the Nigeria sphere and express their gloom-some views about globalization. Awonusi maintains that globalization destroys our cultural and linguistic identity since both of them are interrelated.

Dega, according to Maikanti et al (2021), maintains that the "hegemonic role of English language in Nigeria has reduced the status of local languages to the subsidiary level hence, local language are seen and treated as "second class language". Degas's position is taken in the light of the practice where most Nigeria parents relate to their children at home in English language, believing that it is the language that will be of a greater economic benefit to them (the children) despite the fact that both parents are from the same linguistic background.

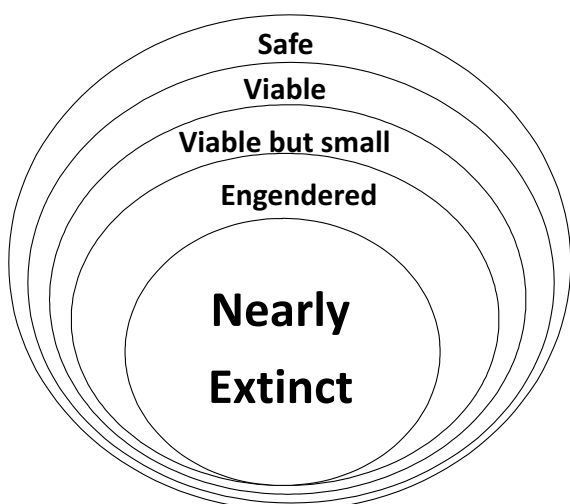
Oleforo (2013) opines that "Globalization can be seen as a revolutionary trend which has systematically interactive phases among nations by breaking down barriers in the areas of culture, commerce, communication and several fields of endeavour." This paints a picture of obliteration and harmonization of differences, and invariably the loss of diversity. In a more linguistically specific perspective, Wallace (2018), examining the challenge of modernization in independent Africa reported how linguistic assimilation can be employed as an instrument to displace the existing indigenous languages, a situation likened to the development and role of the West African Creole and Pidgin which have replaced the native dialects within the sub-region.

In summary, there is enough scholastic as well as practical evidence showing that globalization poses a threat to the survival of indigenous language in Nigeria generally and the minority languages in particular.

## Language Extinction

The concept of language extinction is both a process and a product of a process, it is seen as what can affect any language, major or minor, over a prolonged period of either the loss of its native speakers through death or their dispersal to where it is not used or through the voluntary or forced disuse of the language by its native speakers.

As a product, it is viewed as what has happened that some dialects of some languages are no longer being spoken on the surface of the earth due to the absence of the native speakers or the absolute disuse of the languages by the native speakers. Crystal (2000) classifies all languages at risk into five (5) thresholds, what he described as “Five level indicators of language at Risk”.



Crystal used the indicators above to show that a language that is “Nearly Extinct” is very small (that is, it has very few native speakers), it is surrounded by speakers of bigger languages at four different levels of risk lower than itself while those whose language are “endangered” are the next in size higher to it, and those whose language are “Safe” enjoy a very large population base of its native speakers. Then between the “endangered” and the “safe” are the “viable but small” and the “viable”.

Crystals' diagram of five level indicators of languages at risk could be interpreted as follows:

**1. Nearly Extinct** with very few surviving native speakers of it. Such language has higher risk of getting extinct in the shortest

possible time, most likely through the death of the old existing speakers of it.

**2. Endangered** - with few surviving native speakers. There is high risk of going extinct.

**3. Viable but small** with small population of its speakers living together but aging fast or dispersing its younger members away. There is low risk of extinction.

**4. Viable** with a relatively large size of the population of its native speakers enjoying a “critical mass”. There is a lower risk of extinction.

**5. Safe** with very large size of the native speaker population. There is no risk of extinction.

We are focusing on the languages at levels one (1) and two (2) risks, that is, the “Endangered” and the “Nearly Extinct” which from the diagram do not occupy sufficient space and stand a greater risk of not being spoken again. Boas (1948) traced the imminent loss of North American Indian languages, values and material culture to the zeal to gain public support from the majority immigrants and salvage ethnography. According to Upla (2022), following Boas' thesis, the concept of “acculturation” was invented. The trend is said to have played a pivotal role in cultural anthropology because the effect of it represents the irreversible loss of humanity's heritage and diversity (Goddoy, 1977 and Stoking 1982). Similarly, Rudmin (2003) maintains that acculturation connotes the loss of culture of minority group and its replacement by the culture of the majority group. One of the most common elements of a peoples' heritage that is lost along with the culture is their language, but this is gradual, consciously or unconsciously. But the larger linguistic group wins over the smaller one at the long run.

Siskind (1975) as cited in Upla, Agba, and Effiom (2022), following the findings of a group of scholars who worked on the native Amazonians, averred that the “Munduruku Society of Brazil were moving to its demise” and concluded by blaming “the technology of the industrial world for destroying the Munduruku Society”.

Following a study on the language

extinction process, Romain (2007) maintains that around half of the world's languages have expired in the last five hundred (500) years and that as many as 60% to 90% of the world's approximately 6,900 languages may be at the risk of extinction within the next one hundred (100) years. Prior to this report, Vital Signs (2006-2007), according to Adewale and Oshodi (2013), a publication of a United State-based research group, World-watch, cited in the Punch, 2006, reports that one language is lost every month. Based on this report a number of 516 or 517 Nigerian languages (according to Crystal, 2000 and Babalobi, 2020, respectively) would have been lost before the next country.

Giftedgreen on September 23, 2014 wrote on NairaLand Forum citing a recent UNESCO research report which “shows that 25 percent of children below 11 years are unable to speak the parents' indigenous languages in Nigeria, and if the trend is not checked, Nigerian languages will be in extinction in two to three generations, that is, in 50 to 75 years' time”.

Giftedgreen's reports noted that currently Nigeria has about 16 endangered languages and 10 extinct languages that can be accounted for (Giftedgreen, 2014).

In summary, Nobody (2014) and Omotalani (2018) have jointly identified 38 languages as being endangered in Nigeria, already three of these are declared extinct by Giftedgreen (2014). It might not take a long time from now before some of the languages “severely” or “critically” endangered would go on extinct. This position is partially in line with the findings of Adewale and Oshodi (2013) who investigated the level of endangerment of Ura, Lupa, Kaami, Bangi, Gelanci and Asu languages spoken in Niger State. The scope of their study covered frequency of the use of the languages in some vital domains like home, market places, relaxation Centres, among others. The study concluded that population and domain are vital variables in determining an endangerment situation. And that the major challenges of the “very small” languages (with a population of less than 10,000 native speakers) are the size of their speakers and

their restricted domains use. Such endangered languages might lose or financially die and go completely extinct. According to Adewale and Oshodi, the death of a language is most commonly caused by bans on regional languages (forced misuse), infection diseases, wars, (resulting in the death of native speakers) migration (the dispersal of the native speakers in the manner that affects the “critical mass” of the population) and cultural assimilation (either by choice or policy entrenchment), arising from globalization or Mcdonaldization. This Globalization is influenced by prestige, status and functionality especially of English. This might destroy our indigenous languages (Fishmen, 2001).

### **Causes of Language Endangerment /Extinction**

Cornell (2014) argues that recent research shows that languages approximate a lognormal distribution in terms of: (1) their number of speakers, and (2) their geographical range. The paper observes that having less than 330 native speakers of a particular language endangers the language, but if it continues to gain speakers it becomes less vulnerable. Cornell states that some researchers conclude that there is some minimum population size required for human languages to thrive. This situation points to an Alle effect, a positive relationship between population size and benefit to the speakers. Range of distribution accounts for landmass coverage of proficient native speakers of language. The wider the safer and the smaller the riskier.

Foltz (2015) identifies climate change resulting in melting glaciers rising sea levels, droughts, flooding, threatened habitats, endangered species and displaced people threaten biodiversity as well as, implicitly, linguistic diversity. In recent times the coastal settlements of the Niger-Benue basin have been swept by floods and population mobility has become more fluid than before. This negatively affects language use within a given threshold. Losing language to natural disasters has affected countries prone to earthquakes and tsunamis



like the killing of about 230,000 people in 2004- causing or depletion of a linguistically diverse settlement. Flotz also notes that migration affects language change and death.

Day Translation (2018) notes that several factors cause language to be endangered. These include diminishing number of native speakers, age, failure to use the language by children, presence of other influential languages, negative attitude towards the language, user's low sense of ethnic identity, discriminatory government policies, linguistically biases job opportunities, and rural- urban drift.

Sanjay Kumar Jha (2018) from the Indian perspective lists the following as major causes of language endangerment:

- (1) Confinement of language to priests
- (2) Fear of complex learning
- (3) Globalization of English
- (4) Lack of economics activities
- (5) Intra community marriage
- (6) Lack of interlingua communication
- (7) Linguistic jingoism
- (8) Political bias
- (9) Lack of institutional support
- (10) Lack of research on endangered languages and
- (11) Lack of sense of pride

From the accounts of different scholars highlighted here, it is obvious that English Language uses its number of speakers and geographical spread against minority languages (Cornell 2014). Most migrants move to urban settlements and meet English or other dominant idiom as a popular language when natural disaster strikes; and that most Nigerian children now aspire to speak English, some have low sense of ethnic identity and would prefer English and government policy in Nigeria is also English bias. It seems that Day Translation's (2018) factors are antithetical to the survival and preservation of indigenous languages, particularly the minority languages which are endangered, and English is most likely to take over their functions.

Jha (2018) among several factors has mentioned the globalization of English as a third factor that causes other languages to be endangered.

## Factors That Prevent Language Extinction

Crystal (2014) cites Anthropologist Akira Yamamoto as having identified nine factors that can prevent Language death:

1. There must be a dominant culture that favours linguistic diversity
2. The endangered community must possess an ethnic identity that is strong enough to encourage language preservation.
3. The creation and promotion of programmes that educate students on the endangered languages and culture
4. The creation of school programmes that are both bilingual and bicultural
5. The native speakers must receive teacher training in the endangered language
6. The endangered speech community must be completely involved
7. There must be language materials created that are easy to use in the language
8. The language must have written materials that encompass new and traditional content
9. The language must be used in new environments and the areas the language is used (both old and new) must be strengthened.

Yamamoto's factors align with the views of Lauren Johnson (2016) on why we should prevent the extinction of Australian language: *utilization of their accumulated knowledge, presentation of cultural identity, securing the biodiversity, encouraging the beauty of bilingualism, prevention of a global embarrassment, and considering them as a symptom of something even more concerning.*

The position of this paper is that we should do our best to salvage the situation of endangered languages, following the suggestions of Yamamoto to prevent English from strangulating them.

## Conclusion

This paper concludes that there is sufficient research evidence that many Nigerian languages are going extinct. So far, some minor languages have been lost due to the death of the native speakers or the shift to a dominant and bigger native language in the immediate environment. Apart from the size

of population, the domain of language use can as well restrict the speaker's choice of language. This situation is gradually creating a wider domain for English to spread into the Nigerian linguistic space to the detriment of our indigenous languages, and if care is not taken we might be losing languages and cultural diversities faster than ever before as it has happened to the extinct languages, especially with about 38 languages presently on the line.

This study calls for a conscious effort

to be made towards the revitalization and preservation of all languages, major or minor, in order to retain the wisdom, knowledge and skills contained in the languages. If we can avert the current threat or minimize it we shall stand to gain so much linguistically and culturally. This can be achieved by adopting the suggestions of Yamamoto (as cited in Crystal, 2014) in consciously encouraging biculturalism and bilingualism where each endangered language is revived and preserved.

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