

# The Role of African Languages in African Development: Challenges and Prospects

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## Abstract

African development has been a major discourse both within and outside Africa, using different parameters. The major concern of this paper is to critically appraise the role of African languages in African development, considering their challenges and prospects. It takes a cursory look at African development from the dimensions of economics, ICT, AI, and similar fields. The paper makes a paradigm shift to language (endoglossic and exoglossic) and development. It examines the extent of development Africa has attained with the use of exoglossic languages, namely English. A strong case is then made for the utilization of African languages as the best promise for robust, meaningful, and all-around African development.

**Keywords:** *African Languages, Development, Challenges and Prospects*

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### **Background to the Study**

The discourse on African development is multi-faceted, encompassing various dimensions such as economics, information and communication technology (ICT), artificial intelligence (AI), and social infrastructure. While these aspects are crucial, the role of language in development is often underestimated. This paper aims to critically examine the role of African languages in the continent's development, juxtaposed with the current reliance on exoglossic languages, particularly English.

### **African Development: An Overview**

The introduction to the National Policy on Education (FGN, 1981:5) in Nigeria states that the Federal Government of Nigeria has adopted education as an instrument par excellence for national development. Development is a common term, usually defined within the premise of social science or economics to mean improvement in the quality of life. In the words of Akpakpan (1987:4):

*Most economists and social scientists in general now see development as having economic, social, political and other dimensions. They define it qualitatively as a process of improvement in the general welfare of the society, usually manifested in the various aspects of the life of the society.*

In the context of the above definition, we may ask ourselves, "What has language got to do with development, whether a foreign or indigenous language?" It is axiomatic that language is the vehicle of thought. This has been empirically proven since the outset of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. As it is true that language is the vehicle of thought, it follows that development is somewhat tied to language.

### **Economic Development**

Economic development in Africa has seen varying degrees of success. Nations like Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya have made significant strides in industrialization and GDP growth. However, widespread poverty and unemployment remain persistent challenges. The economic discourse often highlights the need for innovation, improved infrastructure, and better governance.

### **ICT and AI**

The ICT sector in Africa is burgeoning, with mobile technology revolutionizing communication and commerce. Countries like Kenya, through innovations such as M-Pesa, have demonstrated the transformative potential of ICT. Similarly, AI is beginning to make inroads, promising advancements in sectors such as healthcare, agriculture, and education. However, the adoption of these technologies is often hampered by linguistic barriers, as most digital platforms are predominantly in English.

### **Language and Development: A Paradigm Shift**

#### **Exoglossic Languages**

The legacy of colonialism has left English as a dominant language in many African countries. English is often the medium of instruction in schools, the language of government, and a

crucial tool for international business. While this has facilitated some level of integration into the global economy, it has also marginalized indigenous languages and cultures.

### **A Case for Foreign or Exoglossic Language**

Undermining, under-developing, and underrating indigenous languages, which relegates them to an inferior and unenviable position, have been well discussed by Chumbow (1990), Essien (1977, 1981, 1990, 1992, and 1993), Fafunwa (1987), and Osundare (1982), among others. Without overemphasizing the matter, many anglicized Nigerians believe that English, as an international language, is the key to science, technology, and development. To them, Nigerian languages cannot thrive in an underdeveloped economy or nation (see also Olaofe, 1996). This position is traceable to Le Page (1964:24), who views international languages as a hallmark of rapid growth and development in the wake of independence in Africa. He argues:

*The second function which education must fulfil is an economic one. Nearly all these countries (i.e. African countries) are faced with the problem of how to provide a living forum rapidly increasing Population. Agriculture and economic expansion, the diversification of activities, the industrialization of what have hitherto been peasant communities the creation of a technologically minded and trained middle class are urgent tasks. It is necessary that the clever children of the community should learn as much as possible about the sciences that can help transform their country in as short a time as possible. The language of these sciences is usually one of the major international languages. with English well in the lead as a vehicle (emphasis mine).*

The above position, though questionable as will be shown later in the paper, has been accepted wholeheartedly by English-oriented Nigerians. However, the truth is that the colonial powers had their own selfish motives for retaining their languages, particularly English, as global or international languages, often to the detriment of indigenous languages.

### **Endoglossic Languages**

Endoglossic languages, or indigenous African languages, hold the potential to foster inclusive development. Language is not merely a tool for communication but also a carrier of culture and identity. Utilizing African languages in education, governance, and technology can lead to more meaningful participation by the populace, especially those in rural areas.

### **The Case for African Languages in Development**

#### **Education**

Research indicates that children learn best in their mother tongue during early education. Countries like Ethiopia and Tanzania have implemented policies to use local languages in primary education, resulting in improved literacy rates and better educational outcomes. Promoting African languages in education can enhance cognitive development and foster a sense of cultural pride.

### **Language and Development: A Case for Indigenous Languages**

The results of most researches sponsored by government with tax-payers money on agriculture at the Institute of Agricultural Research (IAR) Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria,

International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) Ibadan, National Agricultural, Extension and Research Liaison Services (NAERLS) ABU Zaria, National Animal Production Research Institute (NAPRI) National Agricultural Research Projects (NARP). West African Farming System Research Network (WAFSPN) etc. never get to peasant farmers that need them due partly to language barrier. Why do we not face the reality by developing indigenous knowledge through indigenous languages for meaningful and realistic development? Writing on indigenous knowledge for development, WAFSRN (1991) strongly affirms that it is the basis for agriculture, health care, food preparation, education, environmental conservation and a host of other activities" What is most intriguing is that such knowledge is passed down from generation to generation, usually by word of mouth. What the foregoing suggests is that we should utilize indigenous languages for our national development.

### **Indigenous languages Option: A way out**

As Matemilola (1999) pointed out, language is the vehicle of human thought for the purposes of development. However, the relevance of indigenous Nigerian languages to national development, particularly in the present computer age of science and technology, is a concern for many people, both linguists and non-linguists, as noted by Aziza (1996). To properly address this issue, it is necessary to examine some developed countries whose progress depends on the active development and use of their indigenous and minor languages. The example of the former Soviet Union readily comes to mind. The former USSR ranked high among the world powers in terms of advanced science and technology. The secret behind the technological development of Russia was the development and use of its own languages, to the exclusion of foreign languages, though there were special schools where instruction was conducted in foreign languages for specific reasons (Novost Press Agency, 1987:49). The country invested heavily in its languages with high commitment, which contributed significantly to its development. For instance, Novost Press Agency (1987:50) reports that:

*In Uzbekistan, which has a population of 18.8 million, (less than the population of Oyo. Ogun. Qsun. Ondo and Ekiti States that are essentially monolingual), there are representatives of about 100 nationalities. Instruction at schools is conducted in seven languages according to a student's choice in Uzbek, Russian, Tajik, Kirghiz, Turkmen, Karakalpak, and Kazakh. At schools where there are pupils of Dungan, Uigúr, Kore an and other minority nationalities. The curricula include native language studies. There are textbooks, books on art and science and radio broadcasts in these languages. Former Russia was a multilingual country but she developed most of her languages to an extent that education is received in them up to the university level. Despite the fact that exponents of English as the world's foremost language of science, technology and communication, Russia developed without English.*

Yet, it remains a world power to reckon with technologically. Examples from other countries, such as Switzerland, Japan, Germany, and China, demonstrate that they achieved significant technological development through the use of their indigenous languages.

### **Suggestions on what should be done in Nigeria and other African countries**

The UNESCO (1953) report that education in the mother tongue is the most effective is incontestable. The results of the Ife Six-Year Yoruba Project (SYYP, 1970-76) also corroborate UNESCO's findings. What is suggested for Nigeria is language engineering and political willpower.

### **Language engineering**

Language engineering has been well discussed by Capo (1990:1). According to him, language engineering is the domain of applied linguistics concerned with the design and implementation of strategies—i.e., the conscious and deliberate stages—aimed at the rehabilitation and optimal utilization of individual languages. It functions as a mechanism of language planning that identifies problems and engineers' solutions to them.

One major objection to using indigenous languages in education for technological development is that these languages lack written materials on technical terms to keep up with modern technology. Chumbow (1990) argues that this objection is itself objectionable. The validity of this objection can be challenged by highlighting efforts already made in producing technical terms in these languages. Bamgbose (1969: 96-97) describes two committees established in 1953 by the Western Government of Nigeria to address grammatical and scientific terminology in Yoruba. Bamgbose (1984) critically assesses the work of these committees, as well as the contributions of Delano (1958) and NERC (1984). An extensive discussion by Bamgbose (1984) on the significant development and expansion of Yoruba vocabulary, as it is increasingly used in various domains in its new roles, demonstrates that indigenous Nigerian and African languages can effectively adapt to modern, sophisticated technology and other areas of human endeavor.

### **Governance**

Governance can be more effective when conducted in languages that the majority of the population understands. This approach can enhance transparency and increase citizen participation in democratic processes. For instance, the use of Swahili in Tanzania has played a crucial role in nation-building and political engagement.

### **ICT and AI**

The development of ICT and AI technologies that support African languages can help bridge the digital divide. Localizing software and digital platforms can make technology more accessible. Projects like Mozilla's Common Voice initiative, which collects voice data in various African languages, are steps in this direction. Such initiatives can democratize access to information and digital services.

Longe (1983) scientifically demonstrates that the binary system in Ifa, the Yoruba divinatory system, underpins computer technology. On Tuesday, 16th July 2024, a paper titled "Application of Artificial Intelligence for the Preservation of Yoruba Cultural Heritage and Historical Monuments using Deep Learning Techniques" was presented to the Association of Yoruba Scholars (Egbe Omoran Yoruba). Numerous other ongoing ICT and AI projects are working to ensure that African languages remain relevant in today's digital age.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this paper, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the role of African languages in promoting comprehensive and sustainable development across the continent:

### **Policy Reformation and Implementation**

**National Language Policies:** African governments should develop and implement robust national language policies that prioritize the use of indigenous languages in all spheres of public life, including education, governance, and media. These policies should be supported by legal frameworks to ensure compliance and sustainability.

**Curriculum Development:** Educational authorities should design curricula that incorporate local languages as mediums of instruction from early childhood education through to tertiary levels. This should include the development of teaching materials and training programs for educators.

### **Educational Initiatives**

**Teacher Training Programs:** Invest in comprehensive training programs for teachers to ensure they are proficient in indigenous languages and equipped with the necessary pedagogical skills to teach effectively in these languages.

**Bilingual Education Models:** Implement bilingual education models that balance the use of indigenous languages and foreign languages, ensuring students gain proficiency in both and can navigate both local and global contexts.

### **Technological Integration**

**Localization of Digital Platforms:** Encourage tech companies and developers to localize software, applications, and digital platforms to support African languages. This includes creating language packs, voice recognition systems, and translation services.

**Development of Language Resources:** Support initiatives aimed at creating digital resources, such as online dictionaries, grammar guides, and educational content, in African languages. Collaboration with international bodies like UNESCO and tech companies can enhance these efforts.

### **Economic Empowerment**

**Language in Business:** Promote the use of African languages in business transactions, advertisements, and consumer services. This can make economic activities more inclusive and accessible to a broader population.

**Support for Local Entrepreneurs:** Provide support and incentives for local entrepreneurs and businesses that use indigenous languages in their operations, fostering a sense of cultural pride and economic independence.

### **Cultural and Social Revitalization**

**Media and Entertainment:** Invest in the media and entertainment sectors to produce content in African languages. This includes television shows, films, music, and literature, which can help preserve and promote cultural heritage.

**Community Programs:** Establish community programs and initiatives that encourage the daily use of indigenous languages in social, cultural, and communal activities, reinforcing their importance and utility.

### **Research and Documentation**

**Linguistic Research:** Support and fund research projects aimed at documenting and studying African languages, especially those that are endangered. This includes creating comprehensive databases and archives.

**Collaboration with Academic Institutions:** Foster collaborations between African universities and international linguistic institutions, such as the West African Linguistic Congress (WALC) and the Linguistic Association of Nigeria (LAN), to share knowledge, resources, and best practices for promoting indigenous languages.

### **International Cooperation**

**Global Advocacy:** Advocate for international recognition and support for the promotion of African languages through global forums, such as the United Nations and the African Union, to garner resources and political backing.

**Exchange Programs:** Establish international exchange programs focusing on linguistic and cultural exchanges, allowing for the cross-pollination of ideas and best practices.

### **Monitoring and Evaluation**

**Regular Assessments:** Implement a framework for regular assessment and evaluation of language policies and initiatives to measure their impact on development goals. Adjust policies based on feedback and changing needs.

**Public Reporting:** Ensure transparency and accountability by publishing regular reports on the progress and challenges faced in implementing language policies and development initiatives.

By adopting these recommendations, African nations can harness the full potential of their linguistic heritage to drive meaningful and inclusive development, ensuring that no citizen is left behind in the journey toward economic growth, technological advancement, and social cohesion.

### **Conclusion**

The role of language in development is profound and multifaceted. While exoglossic languages like English have facilitated certain aspects of development, they have also excluded a significant portion of the African population from meaningful participation. Embracing African languages in education, governance, and technology offers the best promise for more inclusive, robust, and sustainable development. It is imperative for African nations to recognize and harness the potential of their linguistic heritage to achieve genuine progress.

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