The Role of Family in The Transmission of Indigenous Languages in Delta State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Delta State is one of Nigeria's most linguistically diverse federating units, hosting over thirty distinct indigenous languages including Isoko, Urhobo, Ijaw, , Itsekiri, Ukwuani, and Ndokwa. Despite this richness, many of these languages face significant endangerment as transmission across generations weakens. This article examines the family as the primary and irreplaceable site of indigenous language transmission in Delta State. Drawing on sociolinguistic theory, ethnographic evidence, and community-based fieldwork, we argue that the vitality of intergenerational transmission is determined by three interlocking variables: household structure, parental language ideology, and the prestige assigned to indigenous languages relative to English and Nigerian Pidgin. We further identify the parent generation those aged twenty-five to forty-five as the critical hinge point at which transmission either continues or breaks. The article concludes with evidence-informed recommendations for families, communities, and policymakers committed to language maintenance in Delta State.

Keywords: indigenous languages, language transmission, Delta State, family, intergenerational language shift, language endangerment, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Language is more than a communication tool; it is the living repository of a people's history, values, epistemology, and collective identity. When a language ceases to be spoken, what disappears is not merely a set of phonological and grammatical rules but an irreplaceable way of knowing and being in the world (Crystal, 2000; Fishman, 1991). Across sub-

Saharan Africa, the accelerating erosion of indigenous languages in the face of colonial-era prestige hierarchies and postcolonial urbanisation represents one of the most consequential and least attended to cultural crises of the twenty-first century.

Delta State, located in Nigeria's Niger Delta region, presents an especially vivid case study. With a population of over five million people and a linguistic inventory of more than thirty distinct languages belonging primarily to the Edoid, Ijoid, and Yoruboid branches of Niger-Congo, the state is a microcosm of African multilingualism (Elugbe, 1989; Williamson & Blench, 2000). Yet UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger classifies several of these languages including Isoko, Urhobo, and Itsekiri as vulnerable or endangered, with speaker populations declining or ageing significantly (Moseley, 2010).

Among the many factors contributing to this decline school language policies, media dominance, urbanisation, economic migration the family occupies a privileged analytical position because it is the primary site of first language acquisition. A child does not learn Urhobo from a government policy document or a classroom curriculum; she learns it from a grandmother recounting folklore, from a father negotiating a bride-price, from the ambient speech that fills a household from birth. Conversely, a child who grows up in a household where English and Pidgin are the dominant media of daily life will, regardless of her ethnic identity, emerge as a monolingual or passive bilingual.

This article addresses the following research questions: (1) What mechanisms within the family facilitate or impede the intergenerational transmission of indigenous languages in Delta State? (2) Which generational cohort is most critical to the continuity of this transmission? (3) What structural and attitudinal changes are driving language shift at the household level? (4) What can families and communities do to strengthen transmission without waiting for policy intervention?

The article proceeds in six parts. Section 2 reviews the theoretical framework governing language transmission and shift. Section 3 contextualises the linguistic landscape of Delta State. Section 4 analyses the family as a transmission ecosystem, examining intergenerational dynamics, household structure, and mixed-ethnic households. Section 5 interrogates the role of language ideology and prestige. Section 6 offers evidence-based recommendations, and Section 7 concludes.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on three complementary bodies of scholarship: Joshua Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS), the language ecology framework, and language socialisation theory.

2.1 Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale

Fishman (1991) proposed that reversing language shift that is, recovering a threatened language from decline is fundamentally a problem of intergenerational transmission rather than institutional recognition. His GIDS framework identifies

Stage 6, defined as the intergenerational transmission of the threatened language within the home and immediate community, as the sine qua non of language maintenance. Without families actively transmitting a language to children, he argues, all other interventions literacy programmes, broadcast media, school instruction rest on a foundation of sand. This insight has been borne out by subsequent revitalisation scholarship: the recovery of Welsh, Māori, and Hawaiian all required sustained family-level language use before institutional programmes could take root (Hornsby & Mikhailova, 2018; Hinton, 2008).

2.2 Language Ecology

Haugen's (1972) concept of language ecology, refined by Mühlhäusler (1996) and Mufwene (2001), situates languages within a competitive ecosystem where multiple languages coexist, interact, and exert evolutionary pressure on one another. In Delta State, this ecosystem includes English (the official language), Nigerian Pidgin (the dominant lingua franca), and more than thirty indigenous languages. In this environment, a language's survival is determined not merely by the number of its speakers but by the domains in which it is used: home, commerce, religion, and education. A language that retreats from the home domain historically its last stronghold is at severe risk of extinction within two generations.

2.3 Language Socialisation

Language socialisation theory, developed by Ochs and Schieffelin (1984), holds that children are not passive recipients of language but are actively socialised into the values, norms, and identities encoded in the languages around them. The home is the primary arena of this socialisation. Parents, siblings, and grandparents do not merely transmit linguistic structures; they transmit ways of addressing elders, ways of narrating misfortune, ways of asking for favour practices that are deeply tied to specific languages and that carry irreducible cultural meaning. This theoretical lens foregrounds the qualitative richness of what is at stake in language transmission, moving the analysis beyond speaker counts toward questions of lived practice and identity.

3. The Linguistic Landscape of Delta State

According to Mowarin (2004) cited in Igbuwe (2018), language is the key to the heart of the people. If we lose the key, we lose the people. A lost language is a lost tribe, a lost tribe is a lost culture, a lost culture is a lost civilisation. A lost civilisation is invaluable knowledge lost... The whole vast archives in them will be consigned to oblivion. So, these Isoko musicians have helped to maintain, revitalise and rejuvenate language in order to avoid the effect of language death on their speakers.

Delta State, created in 1991 from the former Bendel State, comprises twenty-five local government areas and is bordered by Edo, Anambra, Rivers, and Bayelsa States, as well as the Atlantic Ocean. Its linguistic geography reflects this diversity of borders: speakers of Urhobo are concentrated in the Urhobo-speaking belt of central and southern Delta; Ijaw speakers (Izon) inhabit the creeks and waterways of the south; Isoko and Itsekiri communities are distributed across

the south-central zones; while Ukwuani, Ika, and Ndokwa communities occupy the northern and eastern sectors (Akindele, 2011).

Several sociolinguistic features of this landscape are directly relevant to the question of family transmission. First, the state's languages differ substantially in speaker population and institutional support. Urhobo, with an estimated two to four million speakers, has a relatively robust literary tradition, a Bible translation, and considerable use in traditional ceremonies (Aziza, 2007). Itsekiri, spoken by perhaps two hundred thousand people, is considerably more vulnerable. This disparity means that the family transmission problem is not uniform across the state but varies significantly by language community.

Second, Warri the commercial capital of Delta State functions as a contact zone where speakers of Urhobo, Ijaw, Itsekiri, and Isoko interact daily in a Nigerian Pidgin-dominant environment. Urban Warri represents the most acute site of language shift, where even young people of known ethnic identity are increasingly Pidgin-dominant, with only passive competence in their heritage language (Dada, 2010; Oyelaran, 1993).

Third, the region's history of oil-industry penetration, beginning in the 1950s, has produced sustained socioeconomic disruption: the dismantling of traditional subsistence economies, rapid rural-urban migration, and the reordering of occupational hierarchies in ways that privilege English-language competence. This structural backdrop shapes the language attitudes that families form and transmit.

4. The family as a Transmission Ecosystem

4.1 Grandparents and the Oral Tradition

In the traditional multigenerational household that characterises much of rural Delta State, grandparents are the most consequential agents of language transmission. Their influence operates through two related mechanisms: direct caregiving and oral cultural practice.

Where grandparents are primary or co-primary caregivers as remains common in communities such as Oleh (Isoko), Ozoro (Isoko), Ughelli (Urhobo), and Patani (Ijaw) children are immersed in the indigenous language for the majority of their waking hours during the critical language acquisition window of ages zero to seven.

The proverbs, lullabies, folktales, and daily speech that grandparents employ are not merely linguistic inputs but cultural scripts that encode ontological commitments, relational ethics, and historical memory. In Urhobo, for example, the proverb

"Emono oghọghọ avwọ emono ẹvhẹvhẹ r'oghọghọ," which means a people who forget their language forget their history, circulates in grandparental speech not as a formal lesson but as an ambient articulation of the stakes of the transmission project itself. This is also reflective of Isoko linguistic realities. The assertion above depicts the reality of language endangerment and the quest for language revitalization in Nigeria.

Minority languages, including the Isoko language, has been faced with the risk of death. Since language is a vehicle of conveying cultural experiences, the death of a language automatically suggests the death of culture. It is precisely this ambient quality the unselfconscious embedding of language in the texture of daily care that makes grandparents irreplaceable by any formal instruction programme.

However, demographic change is eroding this arrangement. Urban migration separates grandchildren from grandparents geographically. Nuclear family norms, partly imported through missionary influence and partly through modernity's general individualisation of the household, reduce the size and intergenerational depth of domestic units. In Warri, Asaba, and Sapele, grandparents may be present only during school holidays, reducing to seasonal rather than daily the transmission that once occurred continually.

4.2 The Parent Generation: The Critical Hinge

If grandparents are the repositories of indigenous language vitality, the parent generation broadly, those born between the late 1970s and the early 2000s is the hinge on which intergenerational continuity turns. It is this generation that mediates between the fluent grandparental generation and the child, and it is in this generation that the most consequential fracture has occurred.

The parents of Delta State's current school-age children came of age under school language policies that actively discouraged indigenous language use. The educational legacy of colonial policy which positioned indigenous languages as obstacles to civilisation rather than assets of personhood produced a cohort of adults who understand their heritage language receptively but lack the productive fluency and, crucially, the confidence to use it consistently with their own children (Schieffelin & Doucet, 1994). This passive bilingualism creates a structural break in the transmission chain: children do not acquire an active command of the language because they never hear it used actively and contextually at home.

Research on comparable language shift situations Breton in France, Scottish Gaelic, Irish in the Republic of Ireland consistently identifies this pattern: it is not the grandparental generation that loses the language but the parental generation that fails to transmit it, often not from indifference but from a combination of linguistic insecurity and a sincere (if misguided) belief that privileging English will benefit their children's life chances (Ó Riagáin, 1997; MacCaluim, 2007).

This dynamic is well attested in fieldwork conducted in Delta State communities. Community interviews (Okonkwo, 2024, unpublished) consistently reveal parents who code-switch into English or Pidgin when speaking to their children but use the indigenous language with their own parents. The result is a household in which the indigenous language functions as a language of deference and ceremony deployed to address elders but not as a language of intimacy, instruction, or everyday function.

4.3 Mixed-Ethnic Households

Delta State's ethnic diversity, which is one of its most distinctive cultural attributes, also creates a specific transmission challenge: the ethnically mixed household. Marriages between Urhobo and Ijaw partners, between Isoko and Ika partners, or between Delta indigenes and partners from other Nigerian states, are not uncommon, particularly in urban centres. In such households, the question of which language to transmit becomes fraught.

The sociolinguistic dynamics of mixed households tend to resolve toward English or Pidgin as the household language, not because parents are indifferent to heritage but because no single indigenous language has a claim of priority, and because Pidgin and English serve as unmarked, conflict-neutral alternatives. The effect, however, is that children in mixed households are at a significantly elevated risk of growing up without active competence in any indigenous language (Adegbija, 1994).

A minority practice one that linguists and community organisations have begun to advocate is the one-parent-one-language approach, in which each parent consistently addresses the child in their own heritage language while using a shared language (typically English or Pidgin) between themselves. This practice, while demanding, has been documented to produce genuine bilingualism and is consistent with the broader family language planning literature (King & Fogle, 2006; Schwartz, 2010).

5. Language Ideology and Prestige

The material and structural factors analysed above do not operate in a vacuum; they are mediated by language ideology the beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions that speakers hold about language and its social meaning. In Delta State, as across much of Anglophone West Africa, the dominant language ideology assigns English the highest prestige and positions indigenous languages as markers of rurality, limited education, and restricted opportunity.

This ideology is not simply a psychological disposition; it is an institution. It is embedded in school admission processes that prioritise English-language performance, in corporate employment practices that screen for 'standard' English, and in broadcast media that frame English use as sophistication. For parents navigating a competitive economy on behalf of their children, the calculation is understandable, even if its long-term cultural costs are severe (Blommaert, 1999; Pennycook, 1994).

What is less often acknowledged is the extent to which this ideology is contested and, in some communities, actively reversed. Among educated urban professionals in Warri and Asaba a demographic that might be expected to be most thoroughly assimilated to English monolingualism there is a growing movement that reframes multilingualism, including indigenous language competence, as a marker of sophisticated cultural capital rather than a limitation. Social media platforms, particularly YouTube channels and Instagram accounts dedicated to Urhobo and Isoko content, have created new prestige associations for these languages among a

younger, digitally connected audience (Coupland, 2007).

Churches and traditional religious institutions have also played an ambivalent but significant role. On the one hand, the historical association of English with the church reinforced prestige hierarchies. On the other hand, many charismatic and Pentecostal congregations in Delta State conduct worship, prayer, and pastoral counselling in indigenous languages, producing a domain of vigorous, emotionally charged language use that carries genuine prestige (Igboanusi, 2001). The oral-religious domain prayers at naming ceremonies, libations to ancestors, funeral orations remains one of the most robust sites of indigenous language vitality, and it is transmitted, primarily, through family participation.

6. Recommendations

6.1 For Families

The single most effective intervention available to families is conscious language choice: the deliberate decision to use the indigenous language as the primary medium of domestic communication. Research on language revitalisation is unequivocal that no external programme can substitute for home language transmission (Fishman, 1991; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006). For families in which parents lack full active fluency, linguists recommend a graduated approach: beginning with specific domains (mealtime, prayer, lullabies) and expanding as confidence grows, rather than delaying transmission until a threshold of fluency is achieved.

Grandparents should be actively recruited into childcare arrangements not merely as convenience but as language transmission agents. Where geographic distance makes this difficult, video-call technology can partially substitute for physical proximity, enabling regular storytelling, language games, and proverb-teaching sessions across distance. In mixed-ethnic households, the one-parent-one-language approach deserves serious consideration. Community organisations and faith institutions in Delta State should establish peer support groups for mixed-ethnic parents navigating this challenge, sharing strategies and normalising multilingual household practice.

6.2 For Communities

Language nests immersive childcare environments in which all staff communicate exclusively in the indigenous language have been transformative in the revitalisation of Māori and Basque. Pilot programmes establishing Urhobo-medium and Isoko-medium crèches and nursery schools in Warri, Oleh, and Ughelli would extend what the family cannot always provide while reinforcing, rather than replacing, domestic transmission. Community radio stations broadcasting in indigenous languages already present in some Delta communities should expand children's programming: songs, storytelling, interactive language learning, and youth drama. When children encounter their language not only at home but in the media they consume, the message that the language is valued and modern is powerfully reinforced.

6.3 For Policymakers

The National Policy on Education's provision for mother-tongue instruction in the first three years of primary education is seldom implemented in Delta State schools. Enforcement of this provision, combined with the training and deployment of teachers with indigenous language competence, would create a formal educational domain complementing domestic transmission.

The Delta State government should establish and adequately fund a Language Documentation and Revitalisation Centre, charged with producing graded reading materials, digital resources, and community language planning support. Documentation of endangered varieties including tonal dictionaries, oral literature archives, and pedagogical grammars is a precondition for revitalisation and is urgently needed for several smaller languages in the state.

7. Conclusion

The fate of Delta State's indigenous languages will ultimately be decided not in parliament or in classrooms but at the kitchen table, in lullabies, in the way a grandparent greets a grandchild. This is not a counsel of despair but a clarification of strategy: family is both the primary site of the problem and the primary site of the solution.

The analysis in this article points to three priority imperatives. First, the parent generation must be supported through attitudinal reframing, community encouragement, and practical language resources to overcome the twin barriers of linguistic insecurity and misplaced cost-benefit reasoning that currently block transmission. Second, the multigenerational household and grandparental caregiving must be recognised as cultural infrastructure, not merely domestic convenience, and policies that maintain intergenerational proximity should be considered within community and urban planning frameworks. Third, the prestige ecology of Delta State's languages must shift, and there are grounds for cautious optimism that it is already beginning to do so through digital media, affirmative community programming, and the growing global discourse on cultural diversity as development capital. The thirty-plus languages of Delta State represent an extraordinary intellectual heritage accumulated over millennia, encoding knowledge systems, ecological understanding, and relational philosophies unavailable in English or Pidgin. Their loss would impoverish not only their speakers but humanity's cognitive and cultural commons. Their survival depends, above all, on families who choose to speak them.

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