

THE LINGERING LEGACY OF BRITISH COLONIALISM: LANGUAGE SHIFT AMONG IGBO AND YORUBA SPEAKERS IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

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Abstract

Language remains one of the most enduring legacies of colonialism in Africa. In Nigeria, the elevation of English during British colonial rule significantly altered patterns of language use and contributed to the gradual decline of indigenous languages in formal domains. This study examines the impact of British colonialism on language shift among Igbo and Yoruba speakers, with particular attention to the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of linguistic change. Drawing on qualitative evidence from archival materials and ethnographic data obtained through interviews and online observations, the study explores how colonial language policies institutionalized English in education, administration, religion, and commerce while simultaneously marginalizing indigenous languages. The findings reveal that English continues to enjoy considerable prestige as a language of education, social mobility, and economic advancement. Consequently, many parents prioritize English in the home, contributing to the weakening of intergenerational transmission of Igbo and Yoruba. Although both languages have experienced significant pressure from English, Yoruba appears to have retained greater visibility in the media, religion, and public discourse. The study argues that contemporary language shift in Nigeria is sustained not only by colonial legacies but also by socio-economic structures that continue to reward proficiency in English. It concludes that meaningful language revitalization requires coordinated policy reforms, increased indigenous-language education, and stronger community-based efforts to preserve linguistic heritage.

Keywords: Language shift, British colonialism, English language, Igbo, Yoruba, indigenous languages, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Language is central to cultural identity, social organization, and the transmission of knowledge across generations (Crystal, 2000; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). Beyond its communicative function, language serves as a repository of collective memory and cultural heritage. In multilingual societies, however, the relationship between languages is often shaped by political power, economic structures, and historical processes. One of the most influential historical forces affecting language use in Africa has been colonialism.

The colonial encounter transformed linguistic landscapes across the continent. Colonial administrations frequently promoted European languages as instruments of governance, education, religion, and commerce, thereby reducing the institutional relevance of indigenous languages (Bamgbose, 1991; Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998). In many postcolonial states, these linguistic hierarchies have persisted long after political independence. Nigeria presents a compelling example of this phenomenon.

Prior to British colonial rule, indigenous languages such as Igbo and Yoruba played vital roles in governance, trade, religion, and cultural transmission. They functioned as complete linguistic systems capable of supporting political institutions, educational practices, and economic activities. The introduction of colonial administration altered these dynamics by establishing English as the dominant language of public life (Phillipson, 1992; Bamgbose, 2000). Through educational policies, administrative structures, missionary activities, and economic incentives, English gradually became associated with prestige, social advancement, and intellectual authority.

Although Nigeria achieved political independence in 1960, the linguistic structures established during colonial rule remain influential. English continues to dominate government institutions, higher education, mass media, and professional communication in Nigeria (Bamgbose, 2000; Emenanjo, 2015). At the same time, concerns about the declining vitality of indigenous languages have intensified. In many urban areas, younger generations demonstrate reduced proficiency in their heritage languages, while English increasingly functions as the primary language of communication.

This study investigates the extent to which British colonialism contributed to language shift among Igbo and Yoruba speakers. It examines how colonial language policies reshaped patterns of language use and how these historical developments continue to influence contemporary linguistic attitudes and practices. By comparing the experiences of two major Nigerian languages, the study contributes to broader discussions on colonialism, language policy, and indigenous language preservation in multilingual societies.

Research Objectives

The study seeks to:

Examine the role of British colonial language policies in promoting English and marginalizing indigenous languages in Nigeria.

Investigate the impact of colonialism on language use among Igbo and Yoruba speakers.

Explore contemporary patterns of language shift and intergenerational language transmission.

Compare the experiences of Igbo and Yoruba within Nigeria's postcolonial linguistic environment.

Identify factors that contribute to the continuing dominance of English in contemporary Nigerian society.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to debates on language policy, cultural preservation, and postcolonial identity. By examining the historical roots of language shift, the study provides insights into the challenges facing indigenous languages in contemporary Nigeria. The findings may inform policymakers, educators, and language activists seeking to develop effective strategies for language maintenance and revitalization. Furthermore, the study contributes to scholarship on colonial linguistic legacies and their long-term consequences for multilingual societies.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Language Shift and Indigenous Language Endangerment

Language shift refers to the gradual replacement of one language by another within a speech community (Fishman, 1991; Crystal, 2000), often across successive generations. It occurs when speakers increasingly adopt a socially, politically, or economically dominant language while reducing the functional use of their heritage language. Although language shift may emerge naturally through migration and contact between linguistic groups, it is frequently accelerated by unequal power relations that privilege one language over another.

Scholars have long argued that language shift is rarely a purely linguistic phenomenon but it reflects broader social, political, and economic transformations that reshape the value attached to particular languages (Fishman, 2001; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). When a language becomes associated with education, employment, social mobility, and political participation, speakers often adopt it as a strategic resource for advancement. Conversely, languages that lose institutional support gradually become confined to domestic and cultural domains, thereby weakening intergenerational transmission.

In multilingual African societies, language shift has frequently been linked to colonial histories (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998; Bamgbose, 2000). European colonial administrations introduced foreign languages as instruments of governance and education, establishing linguistic hierarchies that often survived political independence. As a result, indigenous languages have continued to compete with former colonial languages for relevance in public life. Nigeria exemplifies this pattern, where English remains dominant despite the country's extensive linguistic diversity.

The cases of Igbo and Yoruba provide valuable insights into the dynamics of language shift in postcolonial contexts. Both languages possess rich literary traditions, extensive speaker populations, and strong cultural significance. Nevertheless, their trajectories have differed in important ways. While Yoruba has maintained considerable visibility in broadcasting, religious practice, and cultural production, concerns about declining proficiency and reduced transmission remain evident. Igbo, meanwhile, has experienced more pronounced challenges relating to language maintenance, particularly among younger urban speakers. Understanding these differences requires an examination of the historical forces that shaped language use in Nigeria.

2.2 Colonialism and the Restructuring of Nigeria's Linguistic Landscape

British colonial rule fundamentally transformed the linguistic ecology of Nigeria (Bamgbose, 1991; Phillipson, 1992). Before colonial intervention, indigenous languages functioned as primary instruments of governance, commerce, cultural transmission, and religious practice. Political institutions in both Igbo and Yoruba societies conducted administrative activities through indigenous linguistic systems, while oral traditions served as important mechanisms for preserving historical knowledge and communal values.

The arrival of British colonial administration introduced a new linguistic order. English became the language of government, education, law, and commerce. Through a combination of administrative policies and missionary educational programmes, colonial authorities established English as the principal medium through which political authority and economic opportunity could be accessed.

Education played a particularly significant role in this transformation (Bamgbose, 2000). Missionary schools and colonial educational institutions increasingly adopted English as the language of instruction, creating a direct relationship between linguistic competence and social advancement. Access to formal employment, government

positions, and professional opportunities became closely tied to English proficiency. Consequently, English acquired symbolic value beyond its communicative function, becoming associated with intelligence, prestige, modernity, and upward mobility (Phillipson, 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

The long-term consequence of these policies was the creation of a hierarchical linguistic structure in which indigenous languages occupied subordinate positions. Although Igbo and Yoruba continued to be used within families and local communities, their institutional presence diminished considerably. Over time, many speakers internalized the notion that advancement depended upon mastery of English, thereby accelerating language shift. Importantly, the colonial legacy extends beyond formal institutions. Contemporary attitudes toward language continue to reflect values established during the colonial period. The widespread perception that English offers greater economic and educational opportunities remains a powerful factor influencing language choices among Nigerian families today.

2.3 Language Attitudes and Intergenerational Transmission

Language attitudes play a crucial role in determining whether a language is maintained or abandoned (Fishman, 1991; Crystal, 2000). Positive attitudes encourage active use and transmission, whereas negative attitudes often contribute to language decline. Research across multilingual societies demonstrates that speakers frequently make linguistic choices based on perceived social and economic benefits rather than cultural considerations alone.

In Nigeria, attitudes toward English are generally shaped by its continued role as the language of education, governance, international communication, and professional advancement. Parents often perceive English proficiency as essential for their children's future success (Bamgbose, 2000; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). Consequently, many households increasingly prioritize English during early childhood language socialization.

This tendency has important implications for intergenerational language transmission. When children are exposed primarily to English at home, opportunities to acquire indigenous languages naturally decrease. Although many young Nigerians maintain receptive competence in languages such as Igbo and Yoruba, productive fluency is becoming less common in certain urban contexts. The result is a gradual weakening of linguistic continuity across generations (Fishman, 1991).

The influence of digital communication has intensified these trends. Social media platforms, educational technologies, and online interactions frequently privilege English, reinforcing its dominance among younger speakers. While digital spaces can potentially support indigenous language revitalization, their current usage patterns often reproduce existing linguistic inequalities.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by three complementary theoretical perspectives: linguistic hegemony, domain theory, and cultural displacement.

Linguistic Hegemony- Phillipson (1992) and Skutnabb-Kangas (2000)

The concept of linguistic hegemony explains how dominant groups maintain power through language. Colonial administrations did not merely introduce English as a tool of communication; they established it as a marker of authority, intelligence, and social prestige. The continued dominance of English in postcolonial Nigeria illustrates how colonial linguistic hierarchies can persist beyond formal colonial rule. Linguistic hegemony provides a useful framework for understanding why English continues to enjoy privileged status despite widespread recognition of the cultural value of indigenous languages.

Domain Theory - Fishman (1991) and Fishman (2001)

Fishman's domain theory emphasizes the importance of social contexts in shaping language use. Languages survive when they remain active across multiple domains, including family life, education, religion, government, and commerce. The gradual displacement of Igbo and Yoruba from formal domains has reduced opportunities for regular use, thereby contributing to language shift. This perspective highlights the relationship between institutional support and language vitality.

Cultural Displacement - Mazrui and Mazrui (1998) and Crystal (2000)

Cultural displacement theory focuses on the consequences of linguistic marginalization for identity and cultural continuity. Language carries historical knowledge, collective memory, and cultural values. When speakers lose proficiency in their heritage language, they may also experience a weakening of cultural connections and traditional forms of knowledge transmission. This framework is particularly useful for interpreting participants' concerns regarding identity, belonging, and cultural loss.

2.5 Conceptual Synthesis

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that language shift among Igbo and Yoruba speakers cannot be explained solely by individual linguistic choices. Rather, it emerges from the interaction of historical power relations, institutional structures, and contemporary socio-economic realities. British colonialism established the

conditions that elevated English to a position of dominance, while postcolonial educational systems, labour markets, and social attitudes continue to reinforce that dominance. The persistence of language shift therefore reflects both colonial legacies and present-day inequalities.

The literature reviewed in this study indicates that the decline of indigenous languages is not inevitable. Language vitality depends largely on the extent to which languages remain meaningful within the everyday lives of speakers. Consequently, efforts to strengthen Igbo and Yoruba must move beyond symbolic recognition and focus on expanding their functional roles in education, governance, media, and digital communication.

3. Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the influence of British colonialism on language shift among Igbo and Yoruba speakers in Nigeria. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate because the study seeks to explore historical processes, language attitudes, patterns of language use, and perceptions of linguistic identity rather than measure linguistic behaviour through numerical indicators. The study combines historical document analysis with contemporary ethnographic evidence to provide a multidimensional understanding of language shift across time.

The research is situated within an interpretive paradigm that views language not merely as a system of communication but as a social and cultural resource shaped by historical power relations. Consequently, the study investigates both the institutional mechanisms through which English gained dominance and the contemporary experiences of speakers who negotiate multiple linguistic identities in postcolonial Nigeria.

Data Sources

The study draws upon two principal sources of data: archival materials and ethnographic evidence.

Archival Materials

The historical component of the study is based on archival and documentary sources relating to colonial language policy, missionary education, and administrative practices in Nigeria. These materials include colonial educational reports, administrative memoranda, missionary records, policy documents, historical newspaper accounts, and scholarly publications addressing language policy during the colonial period.

These documents provide valuable insights into the ideological and institutional foundations of English-language dominance in Nigeria. Particular attention was paid to records that documented the role of education, governance, religion, and commerce in promoting English and reducing the institutional visibility of indigenous languages.

Ethnographic Data

To examine contemporary manifestations of language shift, ethnographic data were collected through semi-structured interviews and online observations involving speakers of Igbo and Yoruba. Digital platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook provided opportunities to observe naturally occurring language practices and discussions about language use, identity, and cultural belonging.

The online environment was particularly useful because it enabled participation from individuals residing in different geographical locations while simultaneously providing access to spontaneous patterns of language choice in everyday communication.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. This sampling strategy was considered appropriate because the study sought individuals who possessed direct experience with language use in Igbo and Yoruba communities. The sample included adult speakers from different age groups, educational backgrounds, and residential settings. This diversity allowed the study to capture variations in language attitudes and linguistic practices across generations. Particular attention was given to differences between older speakers, who experienced stronger exposure to indigenous languages during childhood, and younger speakers, whose linguistic experiences have been shaped more extensively by English-dominated educational and media environments.

The inclusion of participants from different social and linguistic backgrounds enhanced the breadth of perspectives represented in the study.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred in two phases.

The first phase involved the systematic review of archival documents and historical records. Documents were selected on the basis of their relevance to colonial language policy, indigenous language use, educational development, and sociolinguistic change in Nigeria. Information extracted from these materials was organized according to major themes relating to language policy, institutional language use, and language attitudes.

The second phase involved ethnographic data collection through online interviews and observations. Semi-structured interviews encouraged participants to discuss their language experiences, attitudes toward English and

indigenous languages, language practices within their families, and perceptions of linguistic change. Interviews were conducted through text-based and voice-note interactions, allowing participants to communicate in ways that reflected their normal communication practices.

Observational data were collected from online interactions in which participants discussed issues relating to language, identity, education, and culture. These observations provided additional evidence regarding actual language choices beyond participants' self-reported attitudes.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This analytical approach was selected because it allows the identification and interpretation of recurring patterns within qualitative data.

The analysis proceeded through several stages. First, the data were read repeatedly to facilitate familiarity with the content. Second, initial codes were generated to identify significant ideas, attitudes, and linguistic behaviours. Third, related codes were grouped into broader thematic categories. Finally, themes were refined and interpreted in relation to the study's research objectives and theoretical framework.

The analysis generated four major themes:

The institutionalization of English during colonial rule.

The marginalization of indigenous languages in formal domains.

Intergenerational patterns of language shift.

Contemporary attitudes toward English and indigenous languages.

These themes formed the basis for the discussion of findings.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Several measures were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the research. First, the use of multiple data sources enabled triangulation between historical and contemporary evidence. Second, the integration of documentary analysis and ethnographic observations allowed the study to compare institutional narratives with lived experiences. Third, participants from different age groups and linguistic backgrounds provided diverse perspectives on language use and language shift.

Together, these measures strengthened the credibility and interpretive depth of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles guided all stages of the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their participation. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. Identifying information was excluded from the presentation of findings, and participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence.

The study also adhered to ethical standards regarding the use of digital data by ensuring that observations were limited to contexts where participation and discussion occurred with informed awareness of the research purpose.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Colonial Language Policy and the Institutionalization of English

The findings indicate that British colonialism fundamentally restructured Nigeria's linguistic environment (Bamgbose, 1991; Phillipson, 1992) by elevating English from a foreign administrative language to the principal medium of governance, education, religion, and economic participation. Archival evidence demonstrates that colonial educational policies systematically promoted English while restricting the institutional functions of indigenous languages. Through missionary schools, government institutions, and legal structures, English became closely associated with authority, literacy, and socioeconomic advancement.

This development reflects what proponents of linguistic hegemony describe as the ability of dominant groups to normalize a particular language as the legitimate medium of knowledge and power. The colonial administration did not simply introduce English as an additional language; it established English as the language through which social mobility could be achieved. Consequently, indigenous languages were gradually excluded from many formal domains.

The long-term effects of this policy remain visible in contemporary Nigeria. Participants consistently associated English with education, professionalism, and social prestige, reflecting findings from previous studies on postcolonial language hierarchies (Bamgbose, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Many regarded English proficiency as essential for employment opportunities and upward mobility. Such attitudes suggest that the linguistic hierarchy established during colonial rule has survived well beyond political independence.

The findings therefore support the argument that language shift among Igbo and Yoruba speakers cannot be understood solely as a consequence of modernization or globalization. Rather, contemporary linguistic behaviour

is deeply rooted in historical structures created during the colonial period. The institutional dominance of English established a foundation upon which later social and economic developments have continued to build.

4.2 Language Attitudes and the Reproduction of Colonial Linguistic Values

A central finding of the study is the persistence of positive attitudes toward English and the simultaneous symbolic appreciation—but practical marginalization—of indigenous languages. Participants frequently described English as the language of opportunity, education, and global relevance. In contrast, Igbo and Yoruba were often discussed in relation to culture, tradition, and identity rather than socioeconomic advancement.

This apparent contradiction reveals an important sociolinguistic tension. While participants expressed emotional attachment to their indigenous languages, many also acknowledged that English occupied a more influential position in their daily lives. Such attitudes illustrate how colonial linguistic values continue to shape language choices across generations.

The findings align with studies suggesting that language maintenance depends not only on cultural attachment but also on perceived utility (Fishman, 2001). Languages that offer tangible social and economic benefits are more likely to be transmitted to younger generations. In the Nigerian context, English continues to possess significant symbolic and material advantages. As a result, many parents deliberately prioritize English language acquisition, believing that it will improve their children's educational and professional prospects.

This pattern demonstrates how language shift is reproduced through everyday decisions made within families. Parents are not necessarily rejecting their indigenous languages; rather, they are responding to broader social conditions that reward English proficiency. The result is a gradual transfer of linguistic preference from one generation to the next.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings illustrate the enduring operation of linguistic hegemony. English remains dominant not because speakers are compelled to use it through direct coercion, but because its superiority has become widely accepted as common sense within contemporary society.

4.3 Intergenerational Language Shift and the Weakening of Indigenous Language Transmission

One of the most significant findings concerns the growing generational divide in language use and proficiency. Older participants generally reported greater fluency in their indigenous languages and demonstrated stronger commitment to their continued use. Younger participants, particularly those raised in urban environments, often displayed greater reliance on English for both formal and informal communication.

Many younger speakers understood Igbo or Yoruba but reported difficulties using them confidently in conversation. This pattern suggests a weakening of intergenerational language transmission, a process widely recognized as a key indicator of language shift.

The findings further reveal that language transmission is increasingly influenced by educational and technological environments. English dominates schools, social media platforms, professional interactions, and digital communication spaces. Consequently, younger speakers encounter fewer opportunities to use indigenous languages in contexts associated with prestige, innovation, or advancement.

Fishman's domain theory provides a useful framework for understanding these developments (Fishman, 1991). According to this perspective, language vitality depends upon the maintenance of multiple functional domains. The evidence suggests that Igbo and Yoruba have experienced a gradual contraction of their domains of use. While they remain important within cultural and familial contexts, English increasingly dominates education, governance, business, and digital communication.

This shift has important implications for language maintenance. When younger generations encounter indigenous languages primarily in ceremonial or domestic contexts, they may begin to perceive them as less relevant to contemporary life. Over time, this perception contributes to declining fluency and reduced transmission.

The study therefore highlights the importance of creating new domains in which indigenous languages can function effectively. Language preservation requires more than symbolic celebration; it requires meaningful opportunities for active use in contemporary social, educational, and technological environments.

4.4 Comparing the Experiences of Igbo and Yoruba

Although both Igbo and Yoruba have experienced pressures associated with English dominance, the findings suggest important differences in their trajectories.

Yoruba appears to have retained greater visibility in public life through its presence in religious activities, broadcasting, popular culture, and regional media. This broader institutional support has contributed to the language's resilience despite ongoing pressures from English. The findings indicate that many Yoruba speakers

continue to encounter their language in multiple domains, thereby strengthening opportunities for maintenance and transmission.

The situation of Igbo appears more precarious. Participants expressed greater concern regarding declining fluency among younger speakers and reduced use of the language in urban environments. While Igbo remains culturally significant, its institutional presence appears comparatively weaker in several contexts. This finding supports concerns raised in previous scholarship regarding the long-term vitality of the language.

The contrast between the two languages demonstrates that language shift is not an inevitable consequence of colonialism. Rather, outcomes are shaped by the extent to which languages retain institutional support and functional relevance. Languages that maintain strong representation in education, media, religion, and community life are better positioned to resist decline.

This comparison underscores an important lesson for language policy. Revitalization efforts must focus not only on preserving linguistic heritage but also on expanding opportunities for meaningful language use. The survival of indigenous languages depends upon their ability to remain relevant within contemporary social realities.

4.5 Implications for Language Policy and Cultural Identity

Beyond questions of linguistic behaviour, the findings reveal broader implications for cultural identity and national development. Language functions as a carrier of history, values, and collective memory. Consequently, the decline of indigenous languages raises concerns about cultural continuity and the preservation of local knowledge systems.

Participants frequently linked language loss to feelings of cultural disconnection. Although many younger speakers expressed pride in their ethnic heritage, limited proficiency in their ancestral languages often restricted their access to traditional narratives, oral literature, and cultural practices. This observation supports arguments that language loss involves more than communicative change; it also affects the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations.

The findings therefore suggest that language policy should be viewed as a cultural as well as an educational concern. Effective language planning must move beyond symbolic recognition and focus on practical measures that strengthen indigenous language use in schools, media, governance, and digital environments.

Ultimately, the persistence of language shift among Igbo and Yoruba speakers reflects the continuing interaction between colonial legacies and contemporary socio-economic realities. Addressing this challenge requires sustained institutional commitment alongside community-based efforts to ensure that indigenous languages remain living and productive components of Nigerian society.

Public domains. Effective implementation requires adequate funding, teacher training, curriculum development, and institutional commitment.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides valuable insights into language shift among Igbo and Yoruba speakers, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The research relied primarily on qualitative data and, therefore, does not claim statistical generalizability. Additionally, the study focused on two major Nigerian languages and did not examine the experiences of smaller linguistic communities, which may face different challenges. Future studies may employ mixed-methods approaches and larger sample sizes to provide broader comparative perspectives on language maintenance and shift in Nigeria.

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