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Language Policy and Social Conflict in Contemporary Nigeria: Examining Minority Language Exclusion in North-Central Nigeria

By

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Abstract

Language policy is an important factor in shaping live of an individual and creating national harmony in multilingual societies like Nigeria where we have over 500 indigenous languages co-existing such as Yoruba, Igbo, Uhrobo, Tiv, Isekiri, Hausa, Eggon, e.t.c. In Nigeria, language is not only a means of communication but also a means of identity, power, and access to state affairs. However, despite this diversity, English language remains the official language, while a few indigenous languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo are more recognized and used in different sectors like education, media, politics and governance. This set up has cause the marginalization of many minority language groups, particularly in the North-Central of the country, where language diversity is tied to ethnic identity and politics. We examined how minority language exclusion influences unpleasant thoughts and emotions thereby leading to social conflict and cohesion in our country today thereby using qualitative approach to analyze data from sources like newspapers, television interviews, journals. We examined the rapport between language policy, cultural recognition, and resentment among minority communities in North-Central Nigeria and findings shows that the exclusion of minority languages in education, public administration, politics and media contributes to the conflict in our society. Therefore, we concluded that inclusion of language policies, particularly promoting minority languages in education and governance, can improve national integration thereby reducing social conflict in our nation. Our paper proposes stronger implementation of multilingual policies that acknowledge language diversity as an instrument for peace building and democracy in Nigeria.

Keywords: language policy, conflict, marginalized languages, North-Central of Nigeria, minority language

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, Nigeria has experienced recurring violence, including communal killings, bandit attacks, and kidnappings, particularly in the North-Central of the country. These conflicts are often viewed through ethnicity, religion, and territorial disputes. However, language also plays an indirect role because it shapes identity and group belonging because when minority ethnic communities feel excluded from governance, education, and public communication they may feel marginalized which can cause conflict. Such feelings can intensify distrust between communities, the state and nation therefore creating conditions that worsen existing social tensions but this linguistic diversity should reflect the country's rich cultural heritage, ethnic plurality, and historical complexity not conflict. However, this same diversity poses an obstacle for good governance, education, and national



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integration. Since her independence, the country adopted English as its official language as a medium of communication among all ethnic groups but language policy often shapes how different groups access social opportunities and participate in national life. While this policy was intended to promote national unity but also created inequalities because English and a few dominant indigenous languages particularly Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo became more recognized and acceptable than minority languages. In schools, public administration, and media, many smaller language communities remain invisible. This imbalance raises important questions about representation, inclusion, and social justice. According to Bamgbose (1991), language planning in African states is deeply linked to power relations because the recognition of certain languages often mirrors the political dominance of their speakers. He argues that language policies can unintentionally reinforce social inequality when they privilege major groups while neglecting minority communities. In the Nigerian context, this means that language is not just a cultural but also political. Also, Fishman (1991) emphasizes that language is an identity and social continuity. He explains that when a community's language loses relevance in public institutions, the group may experience a weakened sense of belonging. This perspective is particularly relevant in North-Central where many minority groups strongly associate their languages with ancestral identity and local autonomy. North-Central Nigeria, which includes states such as Plateau State, Benue State, and Nasarawa State, is home of a large number of minority ethnolinguistic communities including Tiv, Idoma, Berom, Chokobo, Eggon, and several other groups whose languages are invisible in formal institutions. This region also experienced recurring communal conflicts, often linked to ethnicity, land disputes, and political representation. While these conflicts are commonly studied through ethnic or religion lenses, the role of language exclusion remains underexplored because this can fuel conflict. According to Igboanusi (2008), the neglect of minority languages in Nigeria contributes to feelings of social exclusion because language is a key marker of recognition in public life. When communities do not see their languages represented in education, governance, or media, they can interpret this as evidence that they are marginalized and such perceptions can deepen grievances and contribute to social instability. According to Uwuma, (2024), Nigeria's national language framework continues to favor a few dominant languages while leaving many minority languages without institutional protection, thereby creating inequality among the people. Similarly, Francis' work on indigenous language policy emphasizes that poor implementation of language policy in Nigeria has contributed to the continued marginalization of smaller linguistic groups. He notes that the absence of strong language-rights protections means many communities experience exclusion from public institutions through language.

The objectives of this study are to examine:

1. the role of language in social cohesion and instability
2. how language policy contributes to social conflict in contemporary Nigeria by focusing on North-Central.
3. To show that language is not only a means of communication but a tool that can either promote inclusion or intensify division depending on how it is managed.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative approach to examine the relationship between language policy, minority language exclusion, and social conflict in contemporary Nigeria, with emphasis on North-Central, particularly Benue State and Plateau State where violence is mostly common. This method is appropriate because the study investigates how language intersects with identity, social exclusion, and conflict, focusing on social realities rather than statistical measurement. The study relies on data from recent academic publications (Mensah et al, 2019), policy documents, selected newspaper reports (The Guardian, 2025, Independent Newspaper Nigeria, 2025), and Channels Television. This study centers more on Benue State and Plateau State because both states have witnessed repeated communal killings, Boko Haram, Fulani attacks, and kidnappings in recent years.



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3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that language policy in Nigeria extends beyond communication and education; it is connected to identity, belonging, and social inclusion. Analysis of recent scholarly works shows that the continued dominance of English and a few major indigenous languages in governance and education has contributed to the marginalization of many minority language communities and will continue if there is no adjustment. In North-Central Nigeria, where we have diverse ethnic groups, this exclusion reinforces existing perceptions of political neglect and cultural invisibility; this indicates that minority language speakers in Benue State and Plateau State often experience language as a marker of social identity rather than merely a means of communication. The Journals reviewed in this study suggest that when a community's language is absent from schools, administrative institutions, and public communication, members may interpret this as a sign of exclusion from national life and this perceptions can deepen grievance, especially when the community is already facing economic hardship, displacement, and insecurity. The finding is that language itself does not directly cause violent conflict, but it may intensify it. Although, in North-Central, communal violence is usually linked to land disputes and weak security responses. However, newspaper reports showed the communities identify attackers and interpret threats with their language. According to Channels Television (2025) reports, officials in Benue State described attackers as speaking unfamiliar languages, which made the residents of the area to perceive them as outsiders. This demonstrates that language function as an important social symbol in conflict situations, reinforcing distinctions between people. Reports from The Guardian Nigeria (2025) and Independent Newspaper Nigeria (2025), revealed that recurring killings and kidnappings in Benue State and Plateau State are often discussed in terms of ethnic and communal identity. Since language is one of the major ways to identify each ethnic groups in Nigeria, its exclusion from official structures can cause invisibility and this can increase distrust in government institutions and deepen local resentment. Majority of ethnic groups in North-Central often face challenges not only in preserving their languages but also in accessing political representation, security, and economic opportunities which deepens crimes and violence. When these inequalities overlap, language indirectly becomes larger part of grievance therefore neglect of minority languages may indirectly contribute to unstable social conditions of the country by reinforcing alienation and weakening trust between communities and the states in the country. We therefore conclude that recognizing and promoting minority languages in education, local governance, and public communication in the country can help strengthen social inclusion and reduce feelings of marginalization thereby reducing conflict. In some conflict prone regions such as Benue State and Plateau State, such measures could contribute to broader peace building efforts by fostering recognition, participation, and national cohesion.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study reveal several recommendations that can address the fall between language policy, marginalized language, and social conflict in Nigeria, particularly in North-Central regions such as Benue State and Plateau State such as:

1. Amendment of language policy

The government should harmonize indigenous languages and amend policies that include minority languages in education, local administration, and public communication. This would reduce the sense of exclusion experienced by these marginalized communities and promote national cohesion.

2. Amendment of school curriculum

Authorities should expand indigenous language at the primary level, especially in linguistically diverse rural areas. Scholars such as Owojecho(2019) and Egbokhare (2025) have emphasized that language inclusion in education supports both learning outcomes and cultural continuity especially in conflict prone areas.



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3. Integration of language inclusion into peacebuilding strategies

The government agencies, traditional institutions, and civil society should ensure that conflict resolution programs, community dialogues, and security awareness campaigns are conducted in local languages that are familiar to the communities. This can improve communication and reduce mistrust.

4. Increase of minority groups in governance and public communication

As we all know, language exclusion often reflects broader political exclusion. The government should improve representation of minority ethnic communities in government structures, media platforms, and policy consultations, make them feel loved. When communities see their languages and identities recognized in official spaces, they are happy and this can reduce conflicts.

5. CONCLUSION

We examined the relationship between language policy, social exclusion, and violent conflict in Nigeria today, particularly marginalized ethnic communities in the North-Central of Nigeria. Our findings showed that language in Nigeria is not just a tool of communication but means of identity, belonging, and access to political and social institutions. The dominance of English as an official language and a few major indigenous languages in governance, education, and public communication has done more harm than good which contributed to the marginalization of many minority language communities thereby leading to killings, kidnapping, fight against western education, especially in the North. While language exclusion does not directly cause killings, kidnappings, or communal violence, it reinforces perceptions of political neglect, cultural invisibility, and inequality. In some parts of the country where there are land disputes, ethnic tensions, weak security institutions, and economic hardship, these perceptions can deepen grievances and mistrust. We therefore conclude that amendment of language policy is essential for preserving cultural heritage and promoting social inclusion, national cohesion, and sustainable peace in the country. Recognizing and integrating minority languages into education, local governance, and public communication can help reduce alienation and strengthen trust between marginalized communities and the government.

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