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## **Rethinking Language Policy and Implementation in Nigeria: A Case for Rivers State**

**\*<sup>1</sup>Macaulay, V.O., & <sup>2</sup>Obunwo, J.N.**

<sup>1</sup>Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>Captain Elechi Amadi Polytechnic, Rumuola, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

\*Corresponding author email: [xcellentvicky@gmail.com](mailto:xcellentvicky@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

Language is at the center of every activity of man, as it is the medium for expression of thoughts, feelings, ideas and opinions. Rivers state is a multi -lingual state with an indigenously diverse population and has over fifteen languages and several dialects spoken across the twenty-three local government areas of the State. This is the main cause of communication gap among citizens of same state who wish to communicate, socialize and transact. This work seeks to propose a language policy for Rivers State. The objectives are to: find out the languages and dialects spoken in the different local government areas (LGAs); identify the ethnic groups found in the state; carry out a linguistic analysis of the LGAs and classify ethnic groups in the state based on their languages/dialects; propose a language policy for the state. This work is hinged on the Applied linguistic theory and the Interactionist theory of language acquisition. It employs the descriptive survey design. Findings reveal that there are more than fifteen languages and twenty dialects in Rivers state; most of the languages in Rivers state do not have standard orthographies giving rise to a wide communication gap; most languages are mutually intelligible across the LGAs. Based on the linguistic analysis of the LGAs, the work recommends that language functions be assigned for official purposes which may cut across regional, local or community levels; early childhood should be in a child's mother tongue and the Port Harcourt pidgin; a book on diction, grammar, treatises on pronunciation and orthography for the Port Harcourt pidgin variety be developed. In concluding, each major ethnic group in the state should strive to develop a standard dialect assigned with more sophisticated roles.

**Keywords:** Language, Dialect, Language Policy, Orthography, Implementation, Mutual intelligibility

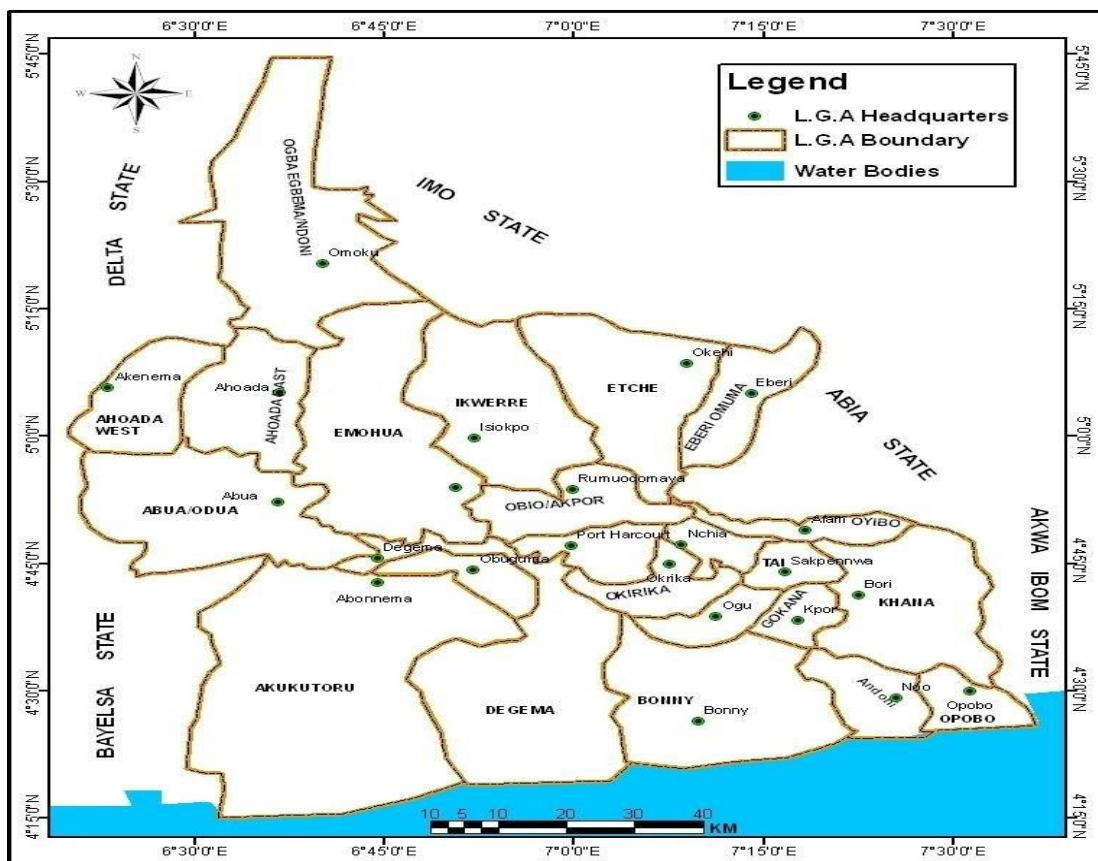
### **Introduction**

Language is at the center of every activity of man. The relevance of language to man's existence cannot therefore be over emphasized as without the use of language human society is incomplete. Every language is characterized by various features irrespective of who speaks what and where. Therefore, two important features of language relevant to this work are that language is environmentally conditioned and language is a reflection of culture. Due to the use of English language used in the dissemination of information in Nigeria, there has been misconception and misinterpretation of communicated messages by a good number of the audience who do not understand the standard English and as such try to ignore information programmed in English language and end up not listening or acquiring knowledge about their environment, they then become totally lost about the happenings around them and even abroad. This category of people may stay uninformed except and only if there is someone who would have the time to interpret, explain and inform them about the happenings around them. With the dissemination of information instructions, transactions and messages in Pidgin English, this group of audience is not lost out totally. Ndimele and Innocent (2016) citing Berenson (1960) affirm that: "Some kinds of communication on some kinds of issues, brought to the attention of some kinds of people, under some kinds of conditions, have some kinds of effects". Communication has been described as the effective sharing of information or idea from one person to another. Qubein (2008) as cited by Omego and Nwachukwu (2013) opines that effective communication can only take place if what is said is what is meant and what is meant is what is understood.

### **Rivers State**

Rivers State is a microcosm of Nigeria. Rivers State was created on May 27th 1967. Gen. Gowon announced the creation of twelve states in Nigeria, and Rivers state was one of them even though the agitation for the creation

A Local Government is the third tier of government vested with the authority to determine and execute measures within a restricted area inside and smaller than a whole state. A local government area is an administrative division of a country that a local government is responsible for. A local government area is any form whose remit covers an area less than that of a state. The idea behind the establishment or creation of local government areas is to bring the government policies and programmes to the grass roots. It also helps to bring government and governance closer to the people especially to the rural areas. This is achieved by segmenting a state into ethnic clusters and speech communities.



**Table 1: RIVERS STATE CONSISTS OF 23 LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREAS**

S/n	Name	S/n	Name
1	Abuo-odual	13	Ikwere
2	Ahoada east	14	Okrika
3	Ahoada west	15	Ogu-Bolo
4	Akuku-Toru	16	Ogba-Egbema Ndoni
5	Andoni	17	Oyigbo
6	Asari-Toru	18	Opobo-Nkoro
7	Bonny	19	Omuma
8	Degema	20	Obio-Akpor
9	Emohua	21	Port Harcourt
10	Eleme	22	Tai
11	Etche	23	Khana
12	Gokana		

### Speech Community

Due to the linguistic and cultural diversity of Rivers state, several speech community abound. A speech community refers to a community of speakers whose experiences and patterns of behaviour are reflected in one language. Linguistic or speech community can also be defined as social groups which may either be monolingual or multilingual, held together by frequency of social interactive patterns and set off from the surrounding areas by weakness in the lines of communication. Gumperz (1972) sees speech community as any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs... The study of speech community also involves the study of dialects. It deals with the mapping of relevant pronunciation patterns, grammar and lexicon on users. These features are also distinctive with respect to grammatically divergent local dialects as in the case of the Ikwere language within the four Ikwere speaking local government areas namely, Ikwere, Emohua, Obio-Akpor and Port Harcourt. It is customary or characteristic of a language to have varieties of distinguished dialects and use (registers). Dialects simply put are the varieties of a main language and a characteristic of language varieties or dialects is that they are mutually intelligible to all speakers of the main language. Rivers state is a multilingual speech community where three or more languages are in use.

### Multilingual Nature of Rivers State

Rivers state is made up of 23 LGAs and more than 10 (ten) ethnic groups with at least ten languages. We can then say that it is both a multi-lingual and a multicultural speech community where divers languages and cultures compete. It is also a speech community where by apart from the indigenous languages there is an existence of an exo-language-English which performs official and national functions while the various indigenous languages are used for interactional communication in their respective domains of operation. It should be noted that the multilingual nature of a culture necessitates the assignment of function to both the exo-language and indigenous languages. In the case of Rivers State, the English language performs official functions, administrative functions, education, science and technology functions thus appearing to be elitist in nature. The indigenous languages in Rivers state have been grouped into the: Ikwere, Ijaw, Ogoni, Ekpeye, Ogba, Ibani, Engenni, (Igboid) Etche, Eleme, Obolo, Ukwuani. They perform communicative, informative and even educational roles in their respective domains. The above language groups have their pride of place in the state and have been given priority in the development of the state. There are twenty-three (23) languages spoken as first language in Rivers State, the other languages are minority languages. Below are the languages and the local government where they are spoken:

Language	Local Government Areas
Abua	Degema, Ahoada and Abua
Baan	Gokana, Tai and Eleme
Defaka	Bonny
Degema	Degema
Ekpeye	Ahoada
Engenni	Ahoada
Gokana	Gokhana, Tai and Eleme
Ibani	Bonny and Degema
Igboid	Ikwere, Ahoada, Bonny and Opobo
Igbo	Etche and Oyigbo
Ikwere/Iwhnuruohna	Ikwere, P.H, Emohua, Obio/Akpor

Kalabari	Degema, Bonny, Asari-Toru
Khana	Khana, Gokana
Kirike	Okrika, Opobo, Bonny, Degema, Opobo-Nkoro
Nkoroo	Opobo/Nkoroo
Obolo	Andoni
Obulum	Okrika and Abuloma
Odual	Ahoada, Abua
Ogba	Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni/Northern Niger Delta
Ogbogolo	Ahoada
Ogbronuagam	Degema
Ukwuani	Aboh-Ndoni and Ahoada

### Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to propose a language policy for Rivers state and the objectives are to:

1. Find out the languages and dialects spoken in the different local government areas of the state
2. Identify the ethnic groups found in the state
3. Classify ethnic groups based on their languages / dialects
4. Propose a language policy for the state.

### Research Questions

1. What are the languages and dialects spoken in the local government areas of Rivers state?
2. What are the ethnic groups found in the state?
3. How can these ethnic groups be linguistically classified?
4. What language policies can be proposed for the state

### Language Policy

The term language planning, perhaps first used by Haugen in (1959) is very popular in studies on the policies of language. Several definitions have been given on it by scholars but this work describes it as a set of deliberate activities systematically designed to select, form, organize and develop the language resources of a community in order to enhance the utilization of such resources for development.

A policy is a government statement on the planned course of action contained in national documents such as the constitution and the National Policy on Education. A policy is crucial to language planning.

### The Formulation of A Policy

Crucial to language planning is the formulation of a policy. This formulation involves the following general principles:

- (i) Development: an examination of whether the policy contributes to the examination of whether the policy contributes to the development of the society in question
- (ii) Democratization; an examination whether the policy is favourable to the creation of equal opportunity for members of the society.
- (iii) Unity: an examination of whether the policy is going to tamper with the unity of the society in question.
- (iv) Foreign Relations: an examination of whether they policy could be an obstacle to communication with the international community.

### Requirements for A Language Policy

In formulating a language policy, five or six major factors or dimensions are considered very useful. They are useful in differentiating between language policies and accompanying developments that tend to obtain where there are different dimensions or decisions have been reached the factors can be summarized as follows:

- (i) Perceived socio-cultural integration of the society in question. In other words, there is the need to find out whether the society in question is highly integrated in terms of having great traditions in common at the national levels. These traditions may include among others history, religion, culture, literature, etc.

- (ii) There is the need for a selection of national language among the various languages that are in use in the society. Such a decision may lead to the assignment of different roles which would be considered as a major factor for political integration of different groups of people which in turn will bring about nationalism.
- (iii) There is the need for the adoption of a language of wider communication (LWC). This will involve a consideration of whether such a language will be a permanent national symbol or not a transitional language which can be used for modern function or a unifying language that could only be seen as a working language.
- (iv) Another factor that has to do with the concerns of language planning is the issue of selection of minor or major language foreign or indigenous etc. if a foreign language is selected do the users aim at endonormative (local norm) standardization?
- (v) There is also the need to consider the goals of bilingualism within the society in which the policy has been designed.

### **Pidgin**

A Pidgin is a contact language that results from extended contact between groups of people with no language in common, it evolves when they need some means of verbal communication perhaps for trade. A pidgin is based on linguistic features of one or more languages. Pidgin as defined by Brumfit and Roberts (1983), is a language composed of elements of two or more languages and used only for the purpose of contact and especially for trade between people speaking different languages, but may serve as the mother tongue or day-to-day language of any group using it".

In his definition of pidgin, Hall (1966), asserts that "for a language to be true pidgin, these conditions must be met: its grammatical structure and its vocabulary must be sharply reduced and also the resultant language must be native to none of those who use it. . . (Oxford African Encyclopedia for schools and colleges) defines pidgin as "a language often used when groups of people speak different languages meet for trade".

Todd (1974) defines pidgin as . . . a marginal language which arise to fulfill certain restricted communication needs among people who have no common language" also, Brook (1963) see pidgin as a trade or vernacular language of limited vocabulary and structure. It arises to facilitate communication between people with no common language. UNESCO (1963) defines pidgin as "a language which has arisen as a result of culture contact. The resultant language is mixed".

Again, Decamp (1971), maintains that "A pidgin is a contact vernacular, normally not the native language of any of its speakers". He went on stating that "it is used in trading or in any situation requiring communication between persons who do not speak each other's native language". Also, the Random House unabridged Dictionary (2006) defines pidgin as "an auxiliary language that has come into existence through the attempt by speakers of two different languages to communicate and that is primarily a simplified form of one of the language and a reduced vocabulary and grammatical structure and considerable derivation in pronunciation, he further describes it as any simplified or broken form of a language especially when used for communication between speakers of different language".

From the various definitions, one can observe that the common similarities that the definitions share are that: A pidgin is usually used for the purpose of trading and perhaps among people who do not share a common language. Pidgin has no native speakers but is used as medium of communication between people who are native speakers of other language; hence it is a contact language or a lingua franca of some sort. It can also be seen as a supplementary language arising as a result of certain communication needs.

A pidgin is based on linguistic features of one or more languages and is a simplified language with reduced vocabulary and grammatical structure. The pidgin language is a 'mixed' language that consist of a base language which supplies the bulk of the vocabulary of the 'new' language and one or more substrates which provides the basic morphological and syntactical pattern of the language. The Pidgin English that is spoken in Port Harcourt as a contact language emerged in Port Harcourt as somewhat alternative language to meet with the communication demands that existed in a multi-ethnic of this nature. Pidgin as defined by UNESCO (1963) is "a language which has arisen as a result of contact between people of different languages. A pidgin is a contact language. It is the name given to any language created usually spontaneously out of a mixture of other languages as a means of communication between speakers of different languages.

### Origin of Pidgin English

The pidgin has its origin linked historically to the contact between the European traders and local Africans during the time of colonialism, owing to the inability on the part of African to communicate fluently in Standard English. The language is said to have been derived from English, Portuguese and Dutch, but took a solid form from the freed slaves found in Sierra Leone. This however means that pidgin came into existence through other preexisted languages.

### Reason for The Choice of The Nigerian Pidgin

Certain factors have been identified to be the source of motivation of decision making in language planning in a particular society, these are linguistic diversity, rapid social change, linguistic assimilation, linguistic pluralism, *vernacularization* and internationalism (Cobarrubias, 1983; Fasold, 1984; Wardhaugh, 1986). The goal of language planning is national development, this is perceived in terms of political, socio-economic, educational, scientific, technological and literary as well as language development. Fubara (2006) suggest that since the literacy level is low, there is need to use a common language of communication and pidgin happens to be the most appropriate, he argues that messages for peaceful coexistence are more effective in Nigerian pidgin. So he sees pidgin as the contact language that can cut across the barrier of communication in Port Harcourt.

Following the general principles of language planning, the Pidgin English appears to be the best candidate for this function as it contributes to the development of Rivers State. Pidgin as lingua franca in Port Harcourt will be favourable to the creation of equal opportunity for all citizens ranging from the riverine and the upland communities and indigenes, major groups and minority groups as well as foreigners who reside in the state.

Pidgin English is commonly used as Lingua Franca among educated and illiterate Nigerians, given the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nature of the society. Pidgin holds the interest of audience when used as a medium of communication, this is further reinforced by the nation's high illiteracy levels that vary from one section of the country to another.

A pidgin can be seen as a supplementary language arising as a result of certain communication gaps. A pidgin has some linguistic features of one or more languages. Nigerian Pidgin English is a good example of a language on the border between a pidgin and a creole (although, one may be tempted to conclude that the pidgin spoke in in Warri town has developed into Creole).

Eleegba (1995) discusses some aspects of Nigerian pidgin especially in the context of the integrating functions of language which are that:

1. Nigeria is ethnically neutral
2. The pidgin gives a sense of *Nigerianness* among speakers (in diaspora)
3. It was useful as the language of education in areas where many local languages would make it difficult to implement the national policy
4. It has national spread
5. It has utility as a bridge language in the teaching of English.

### Findings

Findings indicate that:

- 1) at least 20 languages are spoken in Rivers state and this is the main cause of communication gap among citizens of the same state.
- 2) at least 10 ethnic local government clusters exist in Rivers state
- 3) most of the languages and dialects do not have standard orthography and spelling system
- 4) based on the linguistics analysis of the local government areas, it has been ascertain that some languages are mutually intelligible

### Proposals

- Regional dialects should be based on these major groups in Rivers State: Ikwerre, Ogoni, Kalabari, Etche, Ekpeye and Engenni. The above groups of dialects should also be standardized in their different regions.
- This work has been able to propose regional languages for different local government area clusters. They have been so distributed: the Ikwerre/Iwhuruohna language has been assigned to the four Ikwerre speaking local government areas; the Ijaw language has been assigned to Asari-Toru, Akuku-Toru, Degema, Nkoro and Okrika; the Baan language has been assigned to Gokana, Tai and Eleme local government areas; the Igbani language has been assigned to Bonny and Opobo; the Ukwuani language has been assigned to Ogba,

Egbema, Ndoni and Ahoada; the Odual language has been assigned to Abua and Ahoada ; the Igbo language has been assigned to Etche and Oyigbo local government areas; while the Obolo language has been assigned to Andoni local government area.

- The pidgin which is found to be highly accepted can be adopted as the lingua franca of the state since no single ethnic group or speech community can lay claims to it.
- The pidgin has been found to bridge communication gaps between the rich and poor, literate and illiterate therefore the pidgin can conveniently perform linguistic functions in politics, trade, industry and recreation.
- The pidgin effectively delivers messages and is used to motivate, inform, educate, sensitize and arouse.
- As a citizen or resident of Rivers State, the knowledge that no matter one's tribe, race or ethnic group as long as he is capable of expressing himself in Nigeria pidgin, albeit poorly in Rivers state is enough consolation.
- Again in a multi lingual state like Rivers State with diverse languages, dialects and cultures, the use of pidgin as the lingua franca will bring a bond and a sense of oneness among citizens and residents.
- While the languages of Ikwerre, Ogoni, Engenni, Kalabari, Ekpeye and Etche should function as regional. local and community languages, the pidgin English should function as the Lingua franca or language of wider communication and commerce bearing in mind that not everyone in Rivers state may have gone through formal education to acquire the use of standard English.

## Conclusion

Language is a force. It facilitates, unites and divides. The use of pidgin as the lingua franca in Rivers state will bring about unity and cohesion and reinforce the much-desired unity as everyone, educated or uneducated, riverine or upland, majority or minority will have a level playing ground and equal opportunities. The non-indigenes will also not be left out. With this language, the people are one. When one language is used and understood by all everyone will operate with same ideology, vision, perception and goal. Finally, the use of pidgin as a lingua franca or language of wider communication in Rivers state will be a channel or avenue to communicate with international communities such as Benin republic, Cameroun, Ghana, Serra-Leone etc this will bring about socio-cultural integration of the speakers involved. This work has been able to assign regional languages to local government area clusters in Rivers State. They include: Ikwerre, Ijaw, Baan, Ibani, Igbo, Obolo, Odual, Ukwuani, etc. these ethnic groups were linguistically classified based on their language mutual intelligibility.

## Recommendations

- Since the orthography of Nigeria Pidgin has remained a complex project, this work recommends that the Port Harcourt pidgin variety can have its own orthography.
- A simple lexicon/dictionary, grammar books, treatises on pronunciation and style, can be developed with the Rivers languages exclusively forming the substrates, certain unique words from any of the Rivers state languages can either be borrowed or loaned.
- This work seeks to introduce descriptive and narrative studies on the Port Harcourt pidgin.
- Early education should be in a child's mother tongue and the regional language.
- Each language in Rivers state should strive to develop a standard dialect assigned with formal and more sophisticated form associated with educated usage and the model for writing it. It should also provide the basis for codifying and teaching the language.
- Schools cited in the state should include the language of that locality in their curriculum - children should be made to learn and speak the indigenous language of the location of their schools as well as the Port Harcourt pidgin.

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