Parental Responsibility in Combating Language Death in Modern Africa

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Abstract. Language death in modern African societies presents a critical challenge, reflecting a complex interplay of historical, socioeconomic, and cultural factors that threaten the survival of indigenous languages. The legacy of colonialism and globalisation has resulted in the dominance of foreign languages, such as English, French, and Portuguese, over local languages, leading to significant language endangerment and loss. This phenomenon erodes linguistic diversity and undermines cultural Identity, as many communities increasingly adopt these global languages for perceived social mobility and economic advantages. The current state of language death in Africa is alarming, with UNESCO estimating that approximately 40% of the world's 6,700 languages are endangered, many of which are indigenous African languages. Factors contributing to this decline include urbanisation, cultural assimilation, and the influence of mass media favouring dominant languages, often at the expense of local dialects. As younger generations migrate to urban centres in search of opportunities, the transmission of native languages is disrupted, raising concerns about the loss of unique cultural knowledge and oral histories accompanying these languages.

In addressing this crisis, the responsibility for curbing language death is increasingly viewed as a parental duty. Parents play a pivotal role in fostering the use of Indigenous languages within the home and community, ensuring that their children appreciate and engage with their linguistic heritage. Initiatives aimed at revitalising endangered languages often emphasise the importance of parental involvement in language preservation, encouraging practices such as storytelling and community engagement to promote cultural continuity. Efforts to combat language death in Africa are gaining traction through various means, including government policies, educational reforms, and

technological innovations. Collaborative strategies that involve community participation and advocacy for Indigenous languages within educational curricula are critical for ensuring the survival of linguistic diversity on the continent. As the dialogue surrounding language death evolves, the importance of collective action, both at the familial and societal levels, remains vital to preserving Africa's rich tapestry of languages and cultures.

INTRODUCTION

The historical context of language death in modern African society is deeply intertwined with the legacy of colonialism and globalisation. During the colonial era, European powers imposed their languages – such as English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish – on African populations, often making these languages the official means of communication in various domains, including education, government, and commerce [1, 2]. This linguistic dominance marginalised indigenous languages, which were often restricted from use in formal settings, leading to a significant decline in their prevalence and cultural significance [3]. In many cases, the educational systems established during colonial rule favoured using these foreign languages, resulting in a disconnection between younger generations and their ancestral tongues. As noted by Dr Abena Asare, this imposition disrupted the intergenerational transmission of Indigenous knowledge systems, making revitalising these languages crucial for preserving cultural heritage [2].

Consequently, as older generations passed away without adequately transmitting their linguistic knowledge, younger people increasingly opted to adopt foreign languages for better social mobility and employment opportunities, further exacerbating language endangerment [1, 4]. Urbanisation and globalisation have compounded these challenges. As African societies continue modernising, urban environments often prioritise global languages for their perceived economic advantages, while indigenous languages are viewed as less valuable [5]. This trend has contributed to a phenomenon known as language shift, where communities voluntarily or involuntarily abandon their native languages in favour of more dominant ones [6]. The rise of global languages, coupled with the historical impact of colonial policies, has created a precarious situation for many indigenous languages across the continent, leading to concerns about what some scholars describe as "linguistic genocide" [4]. The African diaspora has also played a significant role in this historical context. Forced migrations during the transatlantic slave trade led to the dispersal of African languages and cultures worldwide, resulting in the creation of Creole languages that blended African and European linguistic elements [7]. These linguistic expressions serve as both a testament to the resilience of African cultures and a reminder of the historical disruptions caused by colonialism.

METHOD

Language death in Africa is the primary source of information in this work. Researchers will critically examine the hypothesis of language death in Africa through case studies. Secondary sources of information for this work will include interviews, observations, articles, past work on related topics, journals and the Internet.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Language death is a phenomenon that is particularly significant in Africa, where linguistic diversity is among the highest in the world.

Language death can occur in several stages:

The potentially endangered: Language can be endangered when external pressures such as the dominance of another language, economic factors or social changes begin to threaten its use.

The endangered: This is a situation where children no longer learn language as their first language at home. Younger generations prefer or are encouraged to use the dominant language.

The seriously endangered: Here, the language is spoken by a few older community members. Middle-aged adults might still understand the language but seldom use it. The youngest speakers are in the parent generation.

Moribund: The language is no longer spoken in daily activities and is only used by a few elderly speakers. The youngest speakers are in the grand-parent generation.

Extinct: The language has no living native speakers. It is no longer used in any context. The last native speaker died, and the language is no longer part of active communication or community life.

The current state of language death in Africa.

Language death in Africa has become a pressing issue, reflecting a complex interplay of socioeconomic and cultural factors. According to authors [8], language death has been a historical phenomenon in regions like Middle Belt Nigeria, where dominant languages such as Hausa and Kanuri have overshadowed local languages, resulting in their decline and eventual disappearance [9]. The assimilation of smaller languages often fuels this phenomenon into larger, more powerful linguistic groups or even the official language, English [8]. The transition from language endangerment to death typically occurs under specific conditions. These include cultural assimilation to nearby larger groups, the demographic shifts due to urban migration, and the pervasive influence of mass media promoting 'colonising' languages like English and French [10, 11]. As young people migrate to cities for economic opportunities, they frequently adopt dominant languages, leaving their native tongues behind [10, 12]. This migration threatens linguistic diversity and erodes cultural identities deeply tied to these languages [11]. UNESCO highlights the severity of the situation, noting that about 40% of the world's approximately 6,700 languages are currently endangered, with many indigenous languages having vanished in recent decades due to societal shifts towards more dominant languages [12].

The loss of a language signifies more than just the disappearance of words; it encompasses the loss of unique ecological knowledge, oral histories, and cultural identities, further contributing to the broader erosion of cultural diversity globally [13, 14]. Efforts to combat language death in Africa are ongoing, with activists leveraging technology to document and revive endangered languages. These initiatives emphasise community engagement and the importance of preserving linguistic heritage to maintain cultural Identity and diversity [8, 13]. The responsibility for curbing language death is often seen as a parental duty, as families are encouraged to instil the value of their native languages In younger generations to ensure their survival [6, 11].

Factors contributing to language death. Language death, particularly in the context of modern African societies, is influenced by many factors that undermine the survival of indigenous languages. These factors can be broadly categorised into sociopolitical dynamics, economic pressures, and urbanisation trends.

Sociopolitical Dynamics. One significant factor contributing to language death is the sociopolitical landscape favouring dominant languages over regional ones. For instance, in many African nations, languages such as English and French and local lingua francas like Hausa in Nigeria have gained prominence due to state policies and educational systems prioritising their use [9, 15].

This linguistic hegemony often marginalises indigenous languages, resulting in a decline in their everyday usage and transmission to future generations. Authors [8] highlight that languages may transition from endangerment to extinction when they assimilate into larger or culturally dominant groups, as seen with the Bassa language among the Basawa people in Nigeria, who now primarily speak Hausa [9].

Economic Pressures. Economic factors also play a crucial role in language death. As urbanisation increases, individuals often migrate to cities for better job opportunities, exposing them to global languages that dominate these environments. This shift can create a perception among younger generations that Indigenous languages lack practical utility, leading to their decreased usage in favour of more globally recognised languages [1, 16]. The economic pressures associated with urban living can further entrench these attitudes, as immigrant communities may feel compelled to adopt the dominant culture's language to ensure social and economic integration [17].

Urbanisation Trends. Urbanisation is a double-edged sword in the context of language preservation. While it can provide opportunities for cultural exchange, it often results in the dominance of certain lingua franca, which can marginalise minority languages. In urban centres, the necessity to communicate in widely understood languages usually overshadows the need to maintain local dialects, further exacerbating the decline of Indigenous languages [1, 18]

The interplay between urbanisation and language endangerment poses significant challenges, as younger generations may not recognise the value of their linguistic heritage when faced with the pressing need to assimilate into a globalised society.

The role of media and technology. The impact of media and technology cannot be overlooked when discussing language death. While digital platforms offer potential avenues for language preservation, the overwhelming predominance of global languages in media often results in the sidelining of indigenous languages. For example, the National Broadcasting Corporation's guidelines in various African nations, which advocate for high percentages of local content, are frequently disregarded, with many media outlets opting to broadcast primarily in English [9, 17]. To counteract these trends, media and educational institutions must actively promote and use indigenous languages, fostering a sense of Identity and cultural continuity within communities.

The role of parents in language preservation. Language preservation is a multifaceted endeavour, with parents playing a crucial role in maintaining and revitalising heritage languages within families. By prioritising native languages at home, parents create an immersive environment that naturally encourages children to learn and communicate in their cultural language. This domestic emphasis is vital for ensuring intergenerational continuity and fostering a strong sense of Identity among younger generations [14, 17].

Home Language Practices. Parents' commitment to using their heritage language at home is essential in language maintenance efforts. Many diasporic families engage in practices such as storytelling, singing traditional songs, and playing cultural games to make language learning engaging for their children. These methods help children acquire language skills and instil pride in their cultural heritage [17, 19]. Research has shown that parents who actively use their native language in daily communication significantly contribute to their children's language development and positive attitudes towards their heritage language [19, 20]

Community Engagement. In addition to at-home practices, parents can enhance language preservation by participating in community activities that promote their native language. Local cultural associations and ethnic groups often organise language classes and cultural events where families can connect with others who share their linguistic background. Such initiatives allow parents to collaborate with other speakers, reinforcing the language's relevance in everyday life [14]. Moreover, these community settings serve as vital social hubs that strengthen community bonds and foster a shared commitment to language preservation [17]

Educational Strategies. Incorporating native languages into educational settings is another crucial strategy for parents aiming to preserve their heritage language. Parents can advocate for bilingual education programs that allow their children to learn in both their native language and the dominant language of society; this not only aids in language acquisition but also promotes a sense of cultural pride and belonging. Parents can also support their children's educational journeys by actively engaging with teachers and participating in school activities celebrating linguistic diversity [15].

Leveraging Technology. Modern technology presents new avenues for language preservation that parents can utilise. Digital tools and online resources, including social media platforms, can facilitate language practice and community building among speakers, regardless of geographic barriers. Parents can encourage their children to use digital resources that support language learning, thereby integrating contemporary methods into traditional practices [14, 15]. This combination of approaches empowers families to adapt to changing circumstances while honouring their linguistic heritage.

Initiatives to curb language death. Efforts to combat language death in modern African society involve a multifaceted approach, emphasising community involvement, educational reforms, and innovative technology.

Government and Policy Measures. Governments play a crucial role in language preservation. For instance, Norway has taken significant steps by establishing a Sami language committee that collaborates with the Sami Parliament to promote and protect indigenous languages. This initiative underscores the importance of Indigenous participation in measures to safeguard their languages [21]. Similarly, in various regions, there is a call for long-term national strategies to recognise and support Indigenous languages in governmental policies, ensuring they are acknowledged in national constitutions and used publicly [22].

Educational Reforms. Educational systems must shift towards incorporating indigenous languages into curricula. Many current systems favour dominant languages for instruction, often sidelining mother tongues, which undermines linguistic diversity [23]. Initiatives that advocate for mother tongue instruction have shown promise in enhancing literacy rates and fostering cultural pride among students. This approach supports language retention and empowers local communities by valuing their linguistic heritage [24]. Collaborative efforts between educational bodies and linguistic institutes are essential to develop effective teaching methods and materials for Indigenous languages [25].

Community and Cultural Engagement. Community involvement is pivotal in language revitalisation efforts. Parents and local leaders are encouraged to engage in activities that promote using indigenous languages at home and in public spaces. This grassroots approach helps create an environment where languages thrive [26]. Cultural events, storytelling sessions, and community workshops serve as platforms for intergenerational language transmission, helping sustain family linguistic traditions [24].

Technological Innovations. Advancements in technology have also provided new avenues for language preservation. Researchers and linguists employ innovative software and mobile applications to document and analyse linguistic data, allowing them to capture previously undocumented languages. Additionally, the Internet has democratised access to language learning resources, making it easier for individuals, particularly in diaspora communities, to maintain their linguistic heritage through online courses and interactive platforms [17].

Challenges faced by parents

Parents in modern African societies face numerous challenges that hinder their ability to support their children's language development and academic success. One significant barrier is the psychological-social dynamic, wherein many parents express a need for guidance on assisting their children effectively; this reflects a broader issue of insufficient school support structures that should empower parents to take an active role in their children's education [27]. Furthermore, there is a prevailing notion among some educators that involving parents in the learning process is not their responsibility, which can exacerbate the disconnect between home and school

support systems [27]. Another challenge arises from language choice and cultural Identity. Parents, especially immigrants, often feel pressured to prioritise the dominant language, English, over their native tongue. This shift can lead to a loss of cultural Identity and hinder children's ability to communicate in their mother languages, which is crucial for their cognitive and emotional development [28, 29].

A mother in Jos highlighted that many children lose their ability to speak their mother language due to parental negligence in teaching it, particularly after relocating to areas where a different language predominates [28]. Additionally, the fear of social integration can compel parents to adopt an English-only approach at home, underestimating the benefits of bilingualism [29]. While English proficiency is essential for educational success, research indicates that maintaining a home language can significantly enhance children's academic performance [29, 30]. Moreover, the socioeconomic status of families in disadvantaged communities adds another layer of complexity. In areas where parents may lack educational resources and skills, their ability to provide practical learning support is further diminished. Studies have shown that illiteracy among parents correlates with minimal home learning support, which directly impacts children's academic outcomes [30].

Evidence of effective strategies

Research-Backed Approaches. Recent studies highlight the importance of evidence-based strategies in addressing the challenges of language death in African societies. A qualitative case study focused on isiXhosa-speaking learners identified specific barriers to learning in English-medium classrooms. The research emphasised the necessity of employing culturally relevant pedagogies to facilitate better educational outcomes for these learners [27]. By understanding students' unique linguistic and cultural contexts, educators can implement more effective teaching strategies that acknowledge and incorporate students' native languages.

Community Involvement and Capacity Building. Engaged research initiatives have proven beneficial in combating language loss by promoting community participation and empowerment. The "Language as a Cure" project illustrates this approach by exploring the effects of linguistic discrimination on health and well-being within targeted communities. It emphasises the im-

portance of community involvement in all stages of the research process, ensuring that the voices of minority groups are heard and valued [31].

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, language death in Africa is a complex issue influenced by historical, social and economic factors. While efforts to revitalise endangered languages exist, the pressure of globalisation, urbanisation, and state policies often favour dominant languages, accelerating the deadline for smaller languages. Losing these languages diminishes Africa's Linguistic and cultural diversity, erasing vital parts of its heritage.

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