



# The Efficacy of Indigenous Language for Solving Insecurity in Nigeria

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## Abstract

The language barrier is one of the attributes that have kept the storm of insecurity in Nigeria. While there are 512 indigenous languages, including the three major ones (Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba), the fear of the unknown in the midst of non-indigenous language speakers becomes another life threat. Having known the remarkable values of indigenous language, including helping in peaceful negotiations through philosophical proverbial statements, nurturing a child from a tender age through the moral indigenous orature, identifying the origin and membership in a community, and teaching the desirable attitude that forbids violence, war, terrorism, etc., this paper emphasizes how indigenous language benefits in solving security challenges and the effects it has in keeping people together as a nation. It reasons that having competent communication in the Nigerian indigenous languages will help citizens understand their environment better. It will serve as a guardian against any threat of insecurity in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Indigenous language, insecurity, communication, information.

## Introduction

The use of language as a means of communication is restricted to human beings, and it is the chief distinguishing feature of the human species since all normal human infants acquire language at an early stage in life (Rabiah, 2019). Man is basically dependent on Language (whether indigenous or foreign) for communication. Among many other uses of language, its use for communication about social maintenance and information about security issues seems to be the most important because it involves human life. According to Kashima (2021: 1), language is frequently used to express our feelings and to uphold social relationships in our common world. The use of language and socialization among individuals are inalienable in human nature. It is the commonest identity of the human race. Without language, certainly, the security of human existence would not be as effective as it is today. Information is one of the key roles a language performs in terms of securitization. It is used to communicate against any suspected danger in every geographical area. Without language, one hardly reveals a secret to another. This is true in all languages of the world. Even what one may think to be a primitive culture or society still has a language system that gives and receives information on the basis of security alerts.

However, the security challenges in Nigeria are becoming so problematic that many are now looking for a way forward. This phenomenon is the result of being aware that security has a major impact on sustaining human life. The implication of insecurity remains that it has affected every aspect of human endeavor both politically, economically, socially, religiously and otherwise. This prompted many scholars (like Ayodeji et al., 2018; Katsina, 2012; Ashaola, 2012; Nweke et al., 2014; Eme and Onyishi, 2014 et. c) to proffer solutions to the security challenges in Nigeria.

In Africa, and particular reference to Nigeria, the contemporary security challenges today include terrorism (e.g., Boko Haram insurgency), Militancy (e.g., Niger Delta militants), killings by the Fulani herders, poverty, unemployment, and so much more. This, in effect, has become so imperative that indigenous languages should mediate in solving the problem of insecurity in Nigeria as regards creating awareness or circulating information concerning security situations in any environment we may find ourselves. It will attest to attitudinal change and rebranding of the nation with a full network of information. As a matter of fact, this paper emphasizes the importance of exchanging information as regards security issues with indigenous languages in order to shut down the menace. The mandate here is to learn at least the three major languages of Nigeria as it will strengthen the capacity of security by creating opportunities to reveal the hidden part of hoodlums around the country.

### **Indigenous Language and the Question of Insecurity**

Language as a concept has been variously defined by many individuals, all in a way that captures their essence of using it and the situation in which they are involved. Mondin (1991:133) defines language as “that activity with which man, through vocal or written signs, put himself in communication with his peers (or with some other intelligent being, for instance, God) to express his sentiments, desires, or knowledge.” While in the words of Gimson (1980:4-5) language remains “a system of conventional signals used for communication by a whole community. This pattern of convention covers a system of significant sound units... the infection and the arrangement of words; and the association of meaning with words”. Language, in this aspect, plays the role of establishing social activities among the fellow being. A community of a common language (indigenous language) finds it easy to reconcile their difference. The new Encyclopaedia Britannica (Mancropaedia), p. 642(a) conceives language as:

...a system of vocal communication that comprises a circumscribed set of noises resulting from movements of certain organs with his (man's) throat and mouth...by means of these (man) is able to impart information, to express feelings and emotions, to influence the activities of others, and to comport himself with varying degrees of friendliness or hostility towards persons who make use of substantiality the same set of noises.

From the above definitions, it is deductively acknowledged that language involves a lot of human cognitive processes. It is one of the utmost instruments of humanity. It is through language that man expresses his innermost wishes and desires such that he would be understood. The possibility of interacting with one another in a meaningful way could have been zero if not for language. And so, language has a common attribute of universality in the sense that everybody speaks one language or the other. It is also wise to note that among all other features of language, communication remains the primary aim of language. The essence of language lies in communication.

The primary end of language is communication. Other ends, like getting people to things, depend on this. Many things can be information, requests, commands, ideas, innuendoes, etc. Whether the primary function of language is to inform, or to assert may be disputed, but this function, in fact, receives the most attention (Encyclopedia Britannica vol. 7, 1997: 147).

The citation above makes it clearer that the major aim of using language is nothing but to enable us to communicate. But one noticeable thing is that we fall victim to a language barrier when we come in contact with another language we have not been exposed to, probably because the language is not our indigenous language. Then, the question is, what is indigenous language?

Indigenous language refers to any language that is native to a particular set of people. It is the first-hand language that any individual or group of people used to encounter in life. It is the first language that a child acquires as he grows and exists with the parent in the world. It is also described as the mother tongue or native language.

However, for the sake of clarification, any of the terms is referred to as one and can be used interchangeably in this work.

Moreover, whatever language a child is brought up with, whether English, French, Arabic, Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, etc, remains his mother tongue or indigenous language. No wonder Emenanjo (2004) describes the mother tongue as the language spoken by the child at home as his first language. Babalola (2004), in addition, has it that it is the first language that a child acquires, which is a medium of imparting information, feelings, and desires among the people of a society based on sounds and symbols that they identify themselves with.

Indigenous language plays a fundamental part in maintaining peace and assisting the progress of integrating the indigenous people into an urban area. It remains a valuable source of information for cultural knowledge and helps in uniting people socially. It expresses people's identity and facilitates commonality among the members, especially outside the locality.

In Nigeria precisely, we have numerous indigenous languages across the nation (ethnic minorities inclusive), some of which are embedded in some ethnic groups. Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa are the three major ethnic groups that have the most popular indigenous language in the country. The Yoruba people, with their indigenous language known as Yoruba language, are located at South- West Axis of the country. The Hausa occupy mostly the northwestern and northeastern parts of Nigeria with the use of the Hausa Language as their indigenous language as well as a medium of communication. Igbo people dominate the South-East part of the country, with the Igbo language as their indigenous language. There are other minor languages like Ibibio, Edo, Efik, Ijo, etc., which are all indigenous Nigerian languages.

Indigenous Nigerian languages are those languages that are natural (i.e., first language) that we acquired in our different geographical locations within the country. Urua (2007) depicts indigenous Nigerian languages as those languages that are inherent (belonging) to and are spoken and, in some instances (written) in the Nigerian geopolitical space. Elugbe (1990) has it that the conversational languages in Nigeria are part of indigenous culture and have exact residential areas in any part of Nigeria. On the whole, the above definitions are nothing short of different sides of the same coin. The indigenous Nigerian languages are essentially rooted in the reality of our culture. In other words, our indigenous languages are the apex and the reservoir of our people's identity. Not only that the customs, attitudes, norms, values, and beliefs of our people (Nigerians) cannot be explored without constant reference to our indigenous languages, but it is obvious that even our utterances are encoded and conceptualized in the languages that make us indigenous. No wonder Eyisi (2000) asserts that every aspect of human activity moves in an orbit of language. According to her, man uses language to express love, hatred, anger, happiness, praise, satisfaction, and dissatisfaction; to discuss the political, social, educational, or economic situations in the country; to express religious beliefs; to remark on the weather and even to engage oneself especially when there is no one to have a conversation with. The indigenous Nigerian languages are inseparable from us, for that makes us human and, above all, a nation. It does not need further interpretation in as much as we are known and construed by the language habit of the nation. Sapir (1929: 234), in his contribution, adds, that why we are able to see, hear, and understand as we do is because our habitual mode of living with language in our environment influences certain choices of interpretation. Therefore, the indigenous Nigerian language is not unique in the expression of our culture and identity but also possesses the efficacy of forming and shaping security in our beloved nation.

Regardless of the fact that every government is legitimately assigned the duty to secure the lives and properties of its citizens. The security of the people is always considered first among all other things. It is based on this fact that Omede (2011) takes the concept of security to mean having concerns and interests on issues regarding the lives and properties of individuals, as well as having the ability to counter whatever threat in a state. McGrew (1988), in the same vein, has it that the security of a nation relies more on two fundamental principles such as controlling and taking care of the citizens from both internal and external threats and promoting a more desirable international order together with domestic order, in order that life threats could be reduced to core values and interests of the state. From the above definitions, emphasis is solemnly on the citizens possessing the underlying beneficiaries of every security and any related developmental assistance the state can offer. It is a fundamental and crucial establishment whereby individuals are expected to go about their normal businesses without threats



to either lives or properties. Africa (especially Nigeria) is still lagging in terms of security and, as such, expected to tighten up their belt and face the menace that surrounds every corner of the people in the country.

Moreover, insecurity is the state of no security, uncertainty, and fear of harm, loss of livelihood and properties. It is the antithesis of security. Beland (2005) defines insecurity as the condition of being afraid emanating from the abridgment of protection. It is more of having some exposure to danger. This definition centers more on the visible aspect of insecurity, though it still connects to some other kinds of insecurity like social security and economic security. The above analysis takes us to summarize the notion of insecurity as being subject to danger, vulnerability, and any risk that may attract loss of life and property.

### **Nature and Causes of Insecurity in Nigeria**

The rate at which insecurity increases in Nigeria is very alarming. It is no longer news that a good number of people are encountering different kinds of insecurity on a daily basis. Cases of insecurity in the country are amounting to a large indefinite number as they cover a range of issues from Boko haram, kidnapping for ransom, banditry, farmer-herder conflict, arm robbery, amongst others. To this end, many scholars have discussed the studies of insecurity in the country from different angles (Ibrahim & Igbuzor, 2002; Adagba et al, 2012; Igbuzor, 2011; Achumba et al, 2013; Omede, 2011; Adesoji, 2010; Imhonopi & Urim, 2012; Mijah, 2005; Nwagboso, 2012; Nwolise, 2006; Ogundiya, 2009; Onifade & Imhonopi, 2012). For instance, Ibrahim & Igbuzor (2002) consider ethnoreligious conflicts as the cause of insecurity in Nigeria; Adagba et al. (2012) discuss Nigeria's insecurity from the angle of Boko Haram; Igbuzor (2011) sees peace and security education as the major means of maintaining peace and national development; Achumba et al. (2013) deliberate the implications of insecurity on business activities and sustainable development; Omede (2011) makes analysis concerning security challenges during the Goodluck Jonathan administration; Imhonopi and Urim (2012) look at insecurity from the angle of terrorism and how it affects industrial development in Nigeria, while Nwolise (2006) examines the national security and sustainable democracy and others alike. Giving a repetition of the above-articulated contributions elaborated by the scholars would not be necessary. However, some selected cases of insecurity in the country shall be deliberated on. Some cases that are currently ravaging the peace of people are as follows:

**Kidnapping:** This is the act of taking someone against his will and keeping him in their custody in order to receive the demanded amount of money before he is released. Nwagboso (2012) argues that kidnapping in the South-East Zone can be traced as a spill effect to hostilities, conflicts, and violence in the Niger Delta region where the indigenes of the zone or region felt that they were being exploited without due compensation from the international oil companies (IOCs). Currently, it has gone beyond the South-East Zone, escalating to almost part of the country where prominent indigenous members of the nation are residing. So many people have been victimized as school children, traditional rulers, priests, government officials, etc., were abducted on different occasions.

**Armed Robbery:** The case of armed robbery is prevalent in almost all Nigerian cities. It is so rampant that the activities have been recorded against victims of all ages and walks of life. It is so embarrassing that security measures adopted by the government are yet to handle it properly. At least there is no evidence indicating that the incidents of armed robbery have stopped entirely in the country.

**Boko Haram:** This is a contentious terrorist organization that is based in the Northern states of Nigeria. The sect has vehemently attacked different institutions like schools, churches, mosques, and individuals. Records of their attacks, kidnappings, and killings are unimaginable. Their activities have constituted serious security challenges in the country. It has been a thorn in the flesh of people and a threat to the existence and survival of every aspect of human life within the nation.

Human security in Nigeria is filled with dismay. Think of economic security, food security, health security, personal security, political security, environmental security, community security, religious security, social security, etc, have all been shattered by unscrupulous groups and individuals who do not want the progress of our great nation. Those who have no hope of getting a job cannot boast of security. The sick and the poor who are struggling every day to survive are not secure neither can everybody be assured of security within their environment or community. Killings by the herders, ritualists, cultists, and thuggery have become the order of

the day. However, understanding the main indigenous languages in Nigeria would be of help in identifying, revealing, and tracking their hideouts. Understanding or speaking languages is an added advantage in fighting insecurity. Francisco Toledo says, “If you speak an indigenous language because you belong to a community, you (should) be respected as a community; they should not say you are inferior because you have darker skin or you are superior because you are white” (Quote net. Stand 54 LL, 2021).

Meanwhile, many factors contributed to the race of insecurity in Nigeria, but few of them shall be stated here. The loss of indigenous moral values in some aspects of human life, such as socio-cultural and communal systems, contributed to security challenges in the country. People no longer take their indigenous culture and communal lifestyle as anything worth value anymore. The traditional mode of sanctions and punishments used to be given to the crime committers seem to be dead and gone. According to Onifade et al. (2013), the lack of a communal value system in our society has also rendered an awkward security environment in the country. The new age lifestyle has negatively affected the indigenous socio-cultural values and morals, which has, in effect, contributed to security challenges in the country.

The establishment of the origin or reasons for insecurity can also be traced from the time of military rule when different kinds of weapons were handed over to the military for security use, after which some civilians were opportune to access some, especially within the period of civil war. This prompted both civilians and ex-military men to start using them for criminal activities (Olabanji and Ese 2014).

The cause of insecurity in Nigeria did not just end at the importation of arms and their use of criminal activities but that the Nigerian security system is weak. Achumba et al. (2014) note that the reason is simply because of defective equipment for the security arm of the government, both in weaponry and training. This is quite unfortunate as most of them, often the military personnel lack sufficient arms to face the bandits. Sometimes, their bad attitudes while discharging their duty, as well as working under the influence of prominent men (and, of course, some government officials), contribute to insecurity. Onifade et al. (2013) add that the military forces of the nation and the lawmakers are not standardized. They are not well-paid and as well being politically controlled. In addition, some of them liaise with the criminals by feeding them essential information that helps the criminals to make away freely without the chargeable punishment of the law. These circumstances put the nation's security in jeopardy.

The inability of the government to create job opportunities is another reason behind insecurity in Nigeria. Even creating industries that will be of good help to the young graduates is still a problem in the country. This ugly trend has pushed a lot of people, especially unemployed youths, into criminal activities. Likewise, the poverty syndrome among the people has made many get themselves involved in different sorts of crime. Nwagboso (2012) argues that the inability of the government to tackle the challenges of poverty, unemployment, and inequitable distribution of wealth among ethnic nationalities contributes to the main reasons for insecurity in the country. Unemployment and poverty have severe negative implications for security issues in Nigeria. The hungry ones are ever ready to do anything in order to survive.

### **The Role of Indigenous Language in Solving Insecurity in Nigeria**

Going by the nature of insecurity in Nigeria, it is no longer the governmental race alone. Individuals can also assist by giving sensitive information to security agencies through any of Nigeria's languages. Worthy of note is that the Nigerian Army, as of January 2020, has come up with an indigenous language proficiency course for its officers and soldiers to improve communication to aid the performance in internal security operations across the country. According to Ogbaje (2020), the report made by the Chief of Army Staff, Lt Gen. Tukur Buratai, Nigerian Army Resource Centre (NARC), in collaboration with an Indigenous Language institution, has organized 11 weeks of intensive training for the personnel at the center in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba languages. He says that the resolve and commitment of NARC in driving the language course for the personnel is a result of the changing nature and transmitting threats within the Nigerian domestic security environment. He states that threats like banditry, kidnapping, armed robbery, and farmer-herders clashes, among other evolving security challenges, can undermine the corporate existence of Nigeria if not checked. Thus, he maintains that if the army can confidently and professionally respond to these domestic security challenges based on reliable intelligence

provided through communication with the local population, they will perform creditably. Buratai argues that communicating with the local dialect of the operating environment requires one to be efficient in the language. This is why one must learn the three major Nigerian languages. The ability one teach these local languages will fasten one's speedy integration and ability to penetrate the local operating environments (Ogbaje 2020). In addition, the Director-General of NARC, Major-General Wahab Garba (Rtd), says that the fact that most internal security operations are driven by information and intelligence, understanding indigenous languages is vital to every successful operation. He further states that if one is operating within an environment and cannot speak the local language of that area, it becomes difficult to get the basic information required from them, and that is why one will continue to have problems (Ogbaje 2020). In effect, this shows that the Nigerian army is no longer far from the truth. They have started working on it.

Solving security challenges can start by taking time to embark on studying at least the three major Nigerian indigenous languages- Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba language. Our languages have an important part to play in fostering security in Nigeria. Studying indigenous languages will offer us a better chance to understand ourselves as Nigerian citizens. Knowing ourselves will not only strengthen security but will also strengthen our national values and identity. This is because having a sound knowledge of our indigenous languages is an essential element for safeguarding security challenges. At least we can easily detect when the bad ones intrude into our environment.

When we work on the knowledge of our indigenous languages, it becomes an indispensable instrument for national security as this will help to manage better the numerous ethnic/social crises and other threats like banditry, kidnapping, armed robbery, farmers-herders clashes, among other,s facing the country. While there may be increasing interactions between fellow Nigerians and foreigners who speak the English language, there are few levels of native language exchange among Nigerians themselves, owing to the inability of most Nigerians to speak one or more of the indigenous languages. The importance of understanding Nigeria's indigenous languages is illustrated in the story of an army officer- Col Salish Adamu (from Depot Nigerian Army), who could have lost his life from a suicide bomb attack. He narrates the story thus:

I may recall from one of my experiences years back in Maiduguri, some suicide bombers struck in my location as a commanding officer. In trying to respond to the situation, we met a lady who was wrapped with huge Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). As we were trying to identify the suspect from the first blast, we sighted her, and as we were trying to approach her, she shouted in the local language meant if you think you are men, come closer. God helped us that one of the soldiers understood the language and drew my attention to what the woman was saying (Ogbaje 2020).

This is a real-life story that intricates the importance of understanding indigenous languages. Understanding indigenous languages is very vital to information, especially on security issues. If not that the colleague had understood the language, they could have lost their life on the spot.

Moreover, one of the major roles of language is communication. Communication helps to impact positive change in the living conditions of people. Coldevin (1999) adds, in effect, that it brings about the speedy transformation of a country and the mass of its people. Proficiency in our indigenous languages will enhance communication to hasten our speedy integration and ability to face security challenges squarely. It gives room to exchange sensitive information between the illiterates and the government's security agents on the activities of suspected armed robbers, kidnappers, and terrorists, among others. Information dissemination through indigenous languages brings about positive change in security issues. Okunna (2002), however notes that this positive change can only be actualized when people begin to provide information to the appropriate channels. For him, this will be possible when people are properly guided to reason along with the situation at hand and be able to change towards the rightful direction. Of course, the direction of this paper is to raise the standard of living in Nigeria through adequate security hostages.

Every indigenous language is unique in the expression of secrecy of its speakers. It is used to discuss and plan against individual/s even in the midst of the victim. One loses control of securitization the moment he cannot communicate with people around him because of the language barrier. Edward and Sienkewicz (1990) capture the importance of this and cite Mamadou Kouyate thus: "We are vessels of speech; we are the repositories which



harbor secrets many centuries old. We are the memory of humanity; by the spoken word, we bring to life the deeds and exploits of kings for younger generations”.

Indigenous language, being rooted in the reality of culture, customs, and the tribal life of people, is used to give orientation on how to behave in society. As long as none of the Nigerian cultures and customs advocates violence, hooliganism, or war, the indigenous languages can be used by the community leaders during peace meetings and negotiation to explain to the aggrieved ones the way they will understand better and avoid violence. In short, it is worth reminding that language is the most important equipment people use for cultural transmission, communication, and reflection on their behavior. It controls and checks the actions of people. According to Nicholl (2008), “language is the tool that enables the emergence of self-awareness and consequently voluntary control of (one’s) actions.” The goal of indigenous languages is to make the transition from being self-regulated to becoming other-regulated. By implication, it is high time groups and individuals put their hands together by not limiting themselves to a particular Nigeria’s indigenous languages as that will improve the situation of insecurity in Nigeria.

## Conclusion

Going by the nature of insecurity in Nigeria, the study is of the opinion that our indigenous languages are most appropriate in communicating informational messages against security challenges in Nigeria. Apart from the better understanding and meaning it gives to the people, the cognitive and emotional nature of indigenous language, how people naturally like their native language, and the sense of pleasure and satisfaction derived in communicating in their language, it all makes the use of indigenous language to hold the key to sorting out the challenges of insecurity as information will be easier for circulation. While sensitive information coming from government/ security agencies is to be disclosed to people through their indigenous languages, both literates and illiterates will, in turn, have access to passing sensitive information to the appropriate channels. Security agencies should also be posted in their indigenous environments. This will help them to fish out the bad elements (criminals) among the innocent citizens as well as discharge their duty effectively without fear or favor. Hence, there will be no many suspects among the citizens in any gathering since the language barrier will no longer be the case. There will be a flow of communication in terms of conflict management and resolution

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