

## A critical discourse analysis of statutory silencing of indigenous languages in Nigeria's National Language Policy

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### Abstract

The National Language Policy (NLP) of Nigeria exhibits statutory silencing of Nigerian indigenous languages. This study makes a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the statutory silencing of indigenous languages in the NLP. The study considers the silencing as pragmatic misrepresentation of national languages by those who enacted and institutionalized the policy. The NLP document constitutes the primary data source, which is supplemented with observation, introspection and print materials from library and the internet. Qualitative method is employed. Descriptive, discursive and interpretive techniques are adopted for the data analysis. The analysis demonstrates that by according alien languages (English, Arabic and French) more statutory recognition, promotion and usage, the NLP exhibits statutory silencing of indigenous languages, which amounts to institutional marginalization of Nigerian languages. The study concludes that through the lens of CDA, it is understandable that structural imbalance and domination obtain in the NLP.

**Keywords:** Statutory silencing, indigenous languages, national language policy, critical discourse analysis.

## Introduction

Across the globe, “language is used to keep records, influence people, and as an instrument of faction” (Wallwork, 1978, p. 12). This point highlights the all-importance of language. All human activities are possible only with language use (Mbah, 2018; Dibia & Robert, 2016; Emeka-Nwobia, 2015; Mudasiru, 2015; Uche, 1994). Mbah (2018) argues that “without language, the world would be a flux of confused states, because it will be impossible to concretise our thought into words in the process of thinking” (p. 37). It follows that without language, there will be no education as well as educational policy. As such, any language policy that silences the indigenous languages of a nation puts the nation in confused states. Dibia and Robert (2014) maintain that the extent to which science goes depends on language. That is to say the extent to which national policies on education can go in addressing the issues in the sector depends on language use. Similarly, Uche (1994) has argued, “Without language, science cannot strive; this shows that effective communication in science involves [the] ability to use and understand the technical terms as well as interpret information encoded in symbolic form into another non-symbolic form of language” (p. 101).

As Emeka-Nwobia (2007) has rightly noted, “there is no human society without a language” (p. 3). The language of every given human society is its indigenous language. Thus, the languages of the different Nigerian societies constitute Nigerian indigenous languages (NILs) (Anyanwu, 2023; Nkereuwem & Robert, 2023). Also, every nation has a national policy on language and education. Nigeria is no exception. The National Policy on Education (NPE) is a statutory national document, which was established in 1977 and reviewed in 1981, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2004 and 2013 (NPE, 2013). The National Language Policy (NLP) of Nigeria exhibits statutory silencing of Nigerian indigenous languages (NILs). The statutory relegation of indigenous languages is what this study terms as “statutory silencing”. The study considers the silencing as institutionalized ills against ILs and the pragmatic misrepresentation of national languages by those who enacted and institutionalized the policy.

The National Language Policy (NLP) used for CDA herein is the 2022 revised version. Although there are fragmented policies on Nigeria’s indigenous languages in National Policy on Education (NPE) (2014), National Cultural Policy (1988), National Broadcasting Code of 2016 (amended in 2020), and the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the focus of this paper is on the noted NLP, which constitutes the primary source of data for this study. The arguments made in the work regarding NLP are based on the provisions of the National Language Policy (NLP) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2022), published by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council.

Linguistically speaking, “a Nigerian problem would require a Nigerian solution” (Ubahakwe, 1979, p. xiii). This implies that Nigerian languages are required for solutions to Nigerian problems that need language-based solutions. According to Anyanwu (2023), NILs are internal means of proffering solutions to internal problems. To her, doing so implies looking within for solutions to internal nationhood problems that require internal solutions. In view of the foregoing, this study aims at making a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the statutory silencing of ILs in the NLP.

### **CDA, a framework for understanding statutory silencing**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a multidisciplinary linguistic framework, championed by Theo van Leeuwen, Gunther Kress, Teun van Dijk, and Norman Fairclough, among others, in the 1990s (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Since its formation, CDA has been consistently applied in different fields and proven to be problem-solving (Osuchukwu & Robert, 2024; Amoussou & Allagbe, 2018; Koussouhon & Amoussou, 2016; Koussouhon & Dossoumou, 2015; Parham, 2013; Jahedi & Abudullah, 2012; Bayram, 2010; Bloor & Bloor, 2007). Among other concerns, CDA is concerned with the use of language to perpetuate structural imbalance, (gender) inequality, discrimination, and institutional and societal ills against certain groups, individuals, nations and phenomena. In the context of this study, CDA is a framework for understanding and criticizing the institutional relegation of NILs.

Leaning on CDA, this study argues that by according alien languages linguistic prominence at the expense of the indigenous ones, the Nigerian policymakers of the NPE and NLP statutorily institutionalized linguistic dominance. It is noted that CDA is applied in various fields. Among them are culture and gender studies, feminism, communication, politics, intergroup relations and conflict, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, sociology, and philosophy (Osuchukwu & Robert, 2024). Herein, CDA is deployed to look and frown at issues of language policy and use in the Nigerian context. These fall within the fields of pragmatics, sociolinguistics and communication.

According to Osuchukwu and Robert (2024), beyond the sociolinguistic engagement with language use is the pragmatics of language use. CDA is one of the frameworks of the pragmatics of language use. It offers valuable insights to the linguistic situations such as those under study. It is apt for this study because CDA is a multifaceted approach to language use and studies, which criticizes production and maintenance of power imbalances across societies and/or systems of societies. It also criticizes and analyzes various structural imbalances and inequalities orchestrated, institutionalized and legitimized by power and

politics in society (Osuchukwu & Robert, 2024). The aforementioned ills are what informed the choice of CDA as a framework for examining the statutory silencing of NILs in the NLP and NPE.

Through the lens of CDA, the study argues that the silencing or relegation of ILs in the national policy document language amounts to perpetuation, institutionalization and spread of structural imbalance and politics of non-criticality. The proclamations putting alien languages over the indigenous ones are political and discursive, and lack criticality. Criticality would have made the policymakers see the need for mother-tongue prominence over the alien languages. Or at least, they would have aimed at striking a balance between the two sets of languages. Again, through the lens of CDA, it is quite understood that the policy wrongs evident in the instituted policies on languages in Nigeria do not only show political ills but also misrepresentations of indigenous languages, identities, cultures, and systems of knowledge, development, polity and social life.

These are perpetual ills by the ruling class of the Nigerian society against the nation and its citizenry. In what lends credence to the above, Amoussou and Allagbe (2018) show that CDA is concerned with critical matters such as those on unequal gender relations and the negative construction of women. Thus, the unequal statutory construction and placement of alien and indigenous languages in the Nigeria's national documents are of critical concerns to CDA. Therefore, the foregoing brief on CDA as a framework for understanding the silencing of NILs is believed to suffice for any further exposition.

### **National Policy on Education and language status**

Policy, according to Ahmed and Muritala (2020), is “a plan or course of action” by a government or an organisation, which is thought to “be prudent or tactically-advantageous” (p. 331). This description of policy unveils the policy lapses of the National Policy on Education (NPE) in Nigeria. Ogbonnaya (2013) describes policy as what serves as a blueprint for official action that impacts on the general populace. Educational policies are social constructs given political proclamation using language in both written and oral forms. These constructs impact on the masses. Obviously, the provisions of NPE and NLP have been impacting negatively on Nigerians. Sources identify the following functions of NILs in the Nigerian education system:

- ❖ Serving as a mode of acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes in the educational process, and

- ❖ Serving as a means of the preservation and positive utilisation of cultures and language as symbol of national unity (Afolayan, 1999; Ahmed and Muritala, 2020).

The National Policy on Education (NPE), as Nwangwu (2019) describes it, is a document containing well researched and documented Nigerian policies of education. The description implies that NPE is indeed a statutory document. Considering the lapses of the NPE, the present study questions the possibility of Nigeria's NPE being a product of a thorough research. Among other scholars and analysts, Mbah (2023) agrees that NPE is flawed with inadequacies. He notes that NPE is the blueprint of the educational policy in Nigeria, which largely determines the content of the curricula, the duties and obligations of the teacher, and the language content and pedagogy.

Beyond the case of English, which can be considered pardonable on the grounds of multilingualism and colonialism in Nigeria, this study leans on CDA to criticize several statutory proclamations in the 2022 revised National Language Policy, such as “French shall be the second official language in Nigeria and it shall be compulsory in primary and secondary schools but non-vocational elective in the senior secondary schools” (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2022, p. 10). This proclamation is domineering in tone and implementation. Meanwhile, the statutory injunctions on the use of the NILs are seldom implemented. The statutory recognition and usage provisions on French and Arabic languages are undeserving. Mbah (2011) presents the following summation of the status of alien and indigenous languages in the NLP viz:

**Table 1: The Nigerian Language Policy**

Status of Languages	Official Language	Nigerian Languages	Foreign Languages
Name of language	English L <sub>4</sub>	a. Mother tongue L <sub>1</sub> b. Language of the immediate community L <sub>2</sub> c. Major Nigerian languages L <sub>3</sub>	French L <sub>5</sub>  Arabic L <sub>5</sub>
Status in education	Compulsory from the senior secondary level of education	1. Compulsory in lower primary 2. Compulsory in upper primary 3. Optional thereafter?	Optional

**Source: Mbah (2011 & 2023)**

The above provisions for the Nigerian languages resulted from the 1969 National Curriculum Conference, held in Lagos (Emenanjo, 1990). From the above Table 1, it is understood that the curriculum conference, which produced the Nigerian language policy, recommended that the mother-tongue or the first language ( $L_1$ ) of the child should be used obligatorily from the first stage of formal education up to the upper level of the primary education level. Clearly, the recommendation is faulty, as it relegates and silences ILs and promotes and laid the foundation for the institutionalization of alien languages and the silencing of the indigenous ones.

It can also be assumed that the  $L_1$  qua the  $L_1$  is acquired before the formal educational level, which shows that the Nigerian Language Policy (NLP) is endoglossic at this level (Mbah, 2023). Meanwhile, this is the critical stage of language acquisition and language development of the child. It is the time in which the child's acquisition of their mother-tongue knowledge and linguistic traits should be accorded priority. In that case, the statutory consideration of the  $L_1$  is inconsequential. As Mbah (2023) rightly notes, there is no specific enactment as to the status of the language of the immediate community ( $L_2$ ) and the major Nigerian languages ( $L_3$ ) at this stage. The foregoing observation makes it clear that Nigerian languages are statutorily silenced.

The languages of the immediate community coincide with the major Nigerian languages, namely, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. These are languages, which co-exist with the mother-tongues of many ethnic nationalities on account of proximity, commerce, politics and religion and get to be used more frequently, particularly in heterogeneous settings, and more often than not, in some cultural settings than the mother-tongues (Mbah, 2023). The official language ( $L_4$ ), which is the English language, is stipulated to be compulsory from the upper level of secondary education. The implication is that  $L_1$ - $L_3$  are optional or not to be used from the upper level of secondary education. As Mbah (2023) observes, it is probably only the  $L_5$  category that has a clearly recognised status, optional across all tiers or levels of education.

According to Offorma (2009), although Nigeria is not an Anglophone country, it is surrounded by the 'French seas' and thereby has the  $L_5$  language category in the Table 1 above. Nigeria is bounded to: the North by Niger Republic, the North-east by Chad, the East by Cameroon, and the West by Benin Republic, which are French speaking countries. To the South, the country is bounded by the Atlantic Ocean. At the Addis-Ababa conference of 1961, it was agreed that the English language should be introduced in the Francophone countries so as to engender peace and harmony at official and interpersonal levels among the members of the Economic Community of West African States and the African Union (Offorma, 2009). It is to that end that Nigeria made the following proclamation back home:

For smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria and it shall be compulsory in primary and secondary schools but non-vocational elective in the senior secondary schools (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004, p. 10).

For the present study, the above quoted proclamation highlights the statutory position of French language in Nigeria over the NILs. The language is accorded recognition and compulsory usage across primary and secondary tiers of education. That is quite unlike NILs, with the exception of the so-called major Nigerian languages (Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba) alone. Yet, these three are not accorded the kind of statutory backing and prominence accorded to English, French and Arabic, which are alien to Nigeria and Nigerians. Gongse and Gaksu (2022) agree that since indigenous languages foster self discovery, pride and cultural developments, they should be taught and popularised among individuals of every indigenous speech community or society. That is the position of this study too.

### **Statutory silencing of NILs**

Despite the series of reviews made to NPE and NLP so far, nothing about the statutory relegation of NILs has been changed. This study agrees with Chukwuokoro (2024) and Hassan (2014) that Nigerian government lacks the ability or willingness to be proactive and decisive on critical national matters. Of course, that is why till date, the statutory silencing of Nigerian indigenous languages remains a neglected national concern. Social concerns are knotted with the ground rules of language use (Emeka-Nwobia, 2007). Thus, policies on language are knotted with social and educational concerns. These concerns, among others, are of interest to critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA satirizes structural imbalances and various practices of domination and marginalization. This study argues here that the imbalance between alien and indigenous languages in the NLP is understood better through the lens of CDA. The above points are captured by Mbah (2023), who notes that an interrogation of the balance between English language and NILs “suffuses the agitations for an educational curriculum that midwives the Nigerian ethnic identities, intercultural communication and socio-economic and technological advanced Nigeria” (p. 12).

The imbalance between alien and indigenous languages in the NLP silences NILs. The statutory silencing grounds the worrisome linguistic situations lamented by Ûbahakwe (1979), who observes viz:



Most of the texts on the teaching of English studies in use in Nigerian colleges and universities are either straight importation or mere adaptation of names and titles. The result is that these texts, which were not written with the Nigerian audience in mind, are too generalised to solve problems peculiar to Nigerian situation (p. xiii).

Mbah (2023) rightly observes that “the roles assigned to all the recognised languages are not clear and the implementation of the educational and/or language policy has been, if anything at all, haphazard” (p. 8). While subscribing to Mbah’s thought, this study argues that the roles assigned to alien languages (English, French and Arabic) in the NLP are domineering, unlike those assigned to Nigerian languages. In CDA perspective, NILs are statutorily marginalized in the NLP. This study argues that alien languages are more recognized than NILs in the NLP and by so doing, linguistic marginalization of NILs remains “unchanged yet changeable” statutory silencing of the indigenous languages (ILs).

Obviously, the language policy in Nigeria allows for linguistic dominance by English over all NILs, including Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, though these three also statutorily dominate all other hundreds of NILs (Gongse and Gaksu, 2022). Araromi (2018) states that there is the dire need for Nigerian stakeholders to take up language engineering tasks and reposition NILs for meaningful development, which would allow for the harnessing of their potentials in various regards. Also, Ibrahim (2021) makes a case for review and restructuring of the policy document. This study subscribes to his advocacy and the views of other scholars. The Table 2 below highlight some of the other views upheld by this study:

**Table 2: Evidence from Extant Studies**

Authors	Views
Nkereuwem and Robert (2023)	The development potentials and problem-solving indigenous systems in Nigeria, such as indigenous languages and knowledge, oral literature and history, etc., are consistently neglected, not duly harnessed and used, and subjected to attrition.
Gongse and Gaksu (2022)	There is a strong synergy between indigenous languages and sustainable development strategy. “It is very rare to see policy-makers relate issues of development to language, since the latter is seen purely as no more than an instrument of communication” (p. 125).



Ahmed and Muritala (2020)	The National Policy on Education is the cause of the problems facing Nigerian indigenous languages, consequent upon which NILs have been consistently relegated and endangered statutorily and by individuals.
Appiah (2018)	Negative Western constructions meant to negate and relegate the societal systems of the non-Western nations are ‘the lies that bind’ nations and cultures.
Onyeibe (2017), Schneider (2013)	Language is what makes discourses and social construction possible.
Robert et al. (2016), Nwauzor (2014) Mazrui (2006)	Nigeria should learn and borrow a new leave from nations that have ‘dewesternised’ and are making meaningful progress, returning to their good deserted heritage for a better nation.
Robert et al. (2016)	The lack of progress in Africa is linked to the influence of Western values.
Utietiang (2000)	Western lies, tales or falsehoods shared among Westerners about Africa along with its peoples, cultures and other societal systems erode our African identity, status, belief, nationhood, colour and entire culture.
Owojecho (2020)	The provisions of NPE on language education are rarely implemented.
Okonkwo (2016)	Language policies in education are not duly implemented, as the implementation is ‘to a low extent and [the] extent of materials that enhance languages’ effective implementation is also low in rural areas.’
Ibrahim and Gwandu (2016)	The provisions of the National Policy on Education are not duly implemented, indicating that the poor or failed implementation is as a result of teachers’ negligence of the provisions, the statutory glorification of English language over NILs, challenges of multilingualism, ‘poor policy planning and implementation, and teacher quality and curriculum materials.
Ibrahim and Gwandu (2016)	Students prefer English to NILs; most teachers exhibit negative attitude towards the implementation of language policy; government does not take implementation seriously; NILs are rarely taught, except for Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo; and teachers, students and parents show off pride for English proficiency at the expense of NILs.

Orekan (2010)	English is preferred by many Nigerians to NILs, and NPE has no special recognition of NILs.
Orekan (2010)	There is a gap between English and NILs in the National Language Policy (NLP), as in the NPE.
Adejimola (2010)	There has been crisis of language implementation in Nigeria.
<b>Source: Authors (2024)</b>	

It is quite clear from the above Table 2 that the claims of this study as well as its thesis are given credence previous literatures. On the whole, it is quite logical to hold that by according alien languages (English, Arabic and French) more statutory recognition, promotion and usage, the NLP exhibits statutory silencing of indigenous languages, which amounts to institutional marginalization of Nigerian languages. Just as Adegoke (2020) observes that Nigeria operates a porous security system so this study avers that NLP is porous in its consideration of indigenous languages (ILs).

That is why it puts foreign languages above the indigenous languages, thereby silencing its own languages. The country, through its policymakers, projects alien languages and accord them statutory prominence at the expense of the ILs. The silencing has some grave implications for social life, development, cultural and identity construction and substance, politics and good governance, etc. Be it as it may, a Nigerian problem requires a Nigerian rather than an international solution (Ubahakwe, 1979). Therefore, Nigerian policymakers have to rise to the challenge and proffer tangible solutions to the issues at stake.

## Conclusion

As shown so far, the National Language Policy (NLP) evidently silences NILs, putting the alien languages above them. NILs are not promoted statutorily in Nigeria. This institutionalized development impacts negatively on Nigerians, making many of them to prefer the alien languages (English, French and Arabic) to the indigenous languages. Even the three major Nigerian languages (Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba) are not accorded equal statutory recognition, prominence and usage with the alien languages. The structural imbalance between the two sets of languages and the domination of the ILs by the alien ones are better understood, analyzed and criticized through the lens of CDA.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

- (i) Political leaders should liaise with professionals of Nigerian languages to review and update the NLP.
- (ii) More research studies should be carried out on the thematic concerns of the present study and other related concerns.
- (iii) Young people should be consistently taught by all the agents of socialization, with the school and the family taking the lead, on the need to uphold and master one's indigenous languages.

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