## Home and School Based Issues Confronting the Development of West African Languages: Insights from Cases in Nigeria

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**Abstract**
Different trends confront the development of West African languages (WALs henceforth) and accounts for the paucity of research on WALs. This study explores home and school based trends confronting the development of WALs, drawing evidence from Nigerian case. It is anchored on Skinner's Operant Conditioning Theory (OCT), which considers environment as the cause of linguistic behaviour, and behavioural consequences as what determine possible repetition of behavioural dispositions, such as those against WALs. The primary data are obtained from observation and focus group discussion. The views of the forty (40) discussants are synthesised and presented descriptively, corroborating them with some scholarly views and findings of selected extant studies. The secondary data, obtained from library and internet, are subjected to systematic review and content and qualitative analyses. The analysis shows that the development of WALs is thwarted by systemic and pedagogic inadequacies, westernisation, linguistic imperialism, globalisation trends, and harmful linguistic behaviour or practices by parents and teachers causing engenderment and attrition of indigenous languages (ILs) that follow the substitution of English, Pidgin and Creole. The study concludes that the extent to which WALs would have been developed and their problem-solving potentials harnessed remains thwarted by the identified home and school based trends. The major recommendations include enactment of legislations promoting ILs, and wide sensitisation and reorientation by socialisation agents for attitudinal change.
**Keywords:** Trends, Home, School, Development, West African languages, Nigeria

**Introduction**
Language is used variously to communicate any concerns and discuss any themes, phenomena, individuals, groups and/or societies. It is germane to communication, education, literature, culture, human behaviour, interaction, relationships, interpersonal and intergroup relations, sciences and arts, and all human endeavours (Nkereuwem & Robert, 2023; Robert, 2022; Emeka-Nwobia, 2015; Olaoye, 2013; Bloomfield, 1933). Language is a means of communication among humans and animals (Dibie & Robert, 2014; Monday & Eze, 2012; Nwala, 2008; Emeka-Nwobia, 2007). Human language as well as communication is more advanced than that of the non-human animals. Thus, it is systematic, structured, conventionalised, formalised, rule-governed, codified, and so on, which together constitute its characteristics. Language is a functional abstract phenomenon that has the potentials of solving any problem it is deployed to solve, including development problems.

The implication of the above proposition is that language has the capacity to: meet situations and situational needs of all kinds; trigger and sustain functionality in all spheres that language is used; offer therapeutic services to all persons and areas of life in need of these services; contextualise matters and proffer context-based solutions; and cause as well as facilitate human and phenomenal transformation and development at local, national and international levels. Given the foregoing, it is logical to posit that once West African (WA henceforth) indigenous languages are rightly harnessed, they would transform the region in various regards, with the transformation impacting significantly and variously on indigenous cultures and societal systems of the WA nations.

The affirmation that language is both an instrument and a catalyst of development justifies the thesis of this paper that borne not for the constraining home and school based trends confronting WA indigenous languages, systems and cultures, the region would have attained meaningful regional and national development by now. The foregoing assertion rests on the argument advanced by this study that indigenous languages (ILs) are viable mechanisms for meaningful regional and national development and transformation in various spheres. The argument implies that tackling home and school based negative trends means tackling the nationhood development challenges of the WA region. This study is

aimed at dissecting the major home and school based challenges to the development of West African languages (WALs).

**Theoretical Framework**
The study is anchored on Skinner's (1957) Operant Conditioning Theory (OCT), which considers environment as the cause of linguistic behaviour and behavioural consequences as what determine possible repetition. OCT is considered suitable for this study, because it captures linguistic behaviour. Herein, it basically captures socio-psychological, behavioural and linguistic trends confronting the development of WALs. Operant conditioning is the method of learning involving reward and punishment for behaviours (Skinner, 1957; McLeod, 2018). This study argues that if reward and punishment systems obtain at home and school for right and wrong linguistic behaviour, WALs would not be neglected, endangered, put to attrition, and left less unused and unharnessed. The reward systems would motivate young people to learn, use and promote their indigenous languages (ILs). On the other hand, punishing or not rewarding young people, who neglect, endanger, and exhibit negative attitude towards ILs, would deter the recurrence of such linguistic misdeeds and negative attitude.

This study argues that linguistic behaviour, like the conventional behaviour, essentially has rewards to it, while linguistic indecorum or deviant behaviour attracts punishments. This situation is captured by Skinner (1938), as he postulates that through operant conditioning, an individual makes an association between a particular behaviour and a consequence. Likewise, decorum or worthwhile behaviour attracts rewards. In the context of school system, the reward is pass marks, awards and/or scholarships. The structured ways of teaching and learning undoubtedly highlight or depict operant conditioning. With the systemic conditioning, teachers follow laid-down methods of operation, teaching and grading, among others. These apply to students too. This assertion calls to mind the call by some contemporary African scholars for the decolonisation of African languages, literature, culture and socio-economic and political systems of the African and other non-Western nations.

As McLeod (2018) notes, by the 1920s, John B. Watson had left academic psychology, and other behaviourists were becoming influential, proposing new forms of learning other than classical conditioning. One of the behaviourist theorists was Burrhus Frederic Skinner (aka B.F. Skinner). His views differ slightly from those of Watson (1913). For Skinner, although mind does exist, we have to study observable behaviour rather than internal mental events. Doing so, he argues, is more productive than not doing so but merely knowing or holding on to the reality that a thing like mind exists. Skinner argues that classical conditioning was far too simplistic to be a complete explanation of complex human behaviour. Instead, he explains that the best way to understand behaviour is to look at the causes of an action and its consequences. This approach to understanding behaviour from looking at the causes of an action and its consequences is what Skinner calls 'operant conditioning'.

The centrality of Skinner's theory of behaviourism is that behaviours are externally, environmentally and contextually influenced and determined. In other words, human behaviour is majorly influenced by what the individual learns from the environment. Among others, Andery et al. (2005) and Leigland (1996) uphold and justify Skinner's OCT. They stress the relevance of Skinners' OCT in explaining, constructing, understanding and analysing verbal behaviour. In contrast, Chomsky (1959) is the first to contend that Skinner's OCT is incapable of explaining verbal behaviour (Fodor & Katz, 1964; Smith, 1999). Smith (1999) has observed that Chomsky's review 'laid the foundation for current mentalist linguistics and cognitive science more generally' (p. 97). Stressing that Skinner's book on verbal behaviour is difficult to understand, Chomsky (1959) and Critchfield et al. (2000) consider OCT as being deficient in theorising linguistic behaviour, particularly on the lane of verbal analysis. According to Sundberg (1998), the analysis of behaviour makes it possible for the behaviour analyst to approach common trends and topics in psychology and linguistics.

It follows that the learnt or acquired behaviour of young West Africans influences or impacts on their linguistic behaviour. The influences and impacts from home and school are highly severe and since they are detrimental to both individuals and the society, there is need to condition linguistic behaviour on the right lane. Through the lens of OCT, it is understood that young people in the WA region, as in

Nigeria most especially, learn negative linguistic behaviour from home and school, two core agents of socialisation. Consequently, they act in ways that do not head towards or promote the development of WALs. By Implication, WA homes and schools un/consciously lay the foundation for the continuous underdevelopment of WALs. Negative attitude, showing off for literacy in English or any other alien language(s), preferring English along with other alien languages, Pidgin and Creolisation, disregarding and dabbling ILs are additional to westernisation, globalisation and elitism trends.

## Home and the Underdevelopment of WALs: Nigeria in Focus

Different trends confront the development of WALs. This paper discusses home and school based trends because the major trends it captures obtain largely in home and school environments or contexts. The attitude of parents towards WALs poses severe threat to the development of WALs as a whole and the regions in particular. The linguistic behaviour of these parents, guardians and other personalities making up the home agents of socialisation, and the kind of socialisation they give young people about their ILs adversely affect the development of these languages and their problem-solving potentials. The kind of parenting style deployed by parents makes or mars parenting and informal education and as well affects the formal education of children in terms of their academic achievement (Ubong, 2021; Odongo et al., 2016). Parents, like teachers, make or mar students' academic performance (Pandey & Thapa, 2017; Singh et al., 2014; Dibie & Robert, 2015; Besong & Robert, 2019).

WA homes (parents, guardians and elderly family members) fail to duly correct Eurocentric wrongs, tales, myths and falsehoods about and against Africa. Leaving the African child empty without well grounded informal knowledge on realities, happenings and practices in African and global contexts is a negative home based trend. Globalisation with the imposition of Western systems on Africa and its peoples and systems continuously work against ILs in Nigeria and other African nations. Elitism and negative attitude towards indigenous languages and cultures, as evidenced in Nigeria, have great implications. Negligence, relegation, endangerment and attrition of indigenous systems (Mufwene, 2006), and loss of and crisis over cultural and linguistic identities are the gravest implications of these ugly trends.

The above ugly trends are decried by Adegbite (2003), who observes that most Nigerian elite abandon their indigenous systems, most especially languages, for those of the West. Adegbite (2003) shows that Nigerian undergraduate students, who had internalised and regularly showed such attitudes, were willing to change and embrace their Nigerian systems– Nigerian languages and cultures, upon enlightenment. Apart from Hausa undergraduate students studied by Adegbite (2003), all others preferred English Language to any other languages. This attitude has a bearing to parenting. Elitist parents mostly behave as if understanding and speaking English is the base of life. Nigerian elite are affirmed to attach extreme value, relevance and prominence to alien languages and other aspects of Western (alien) cultures to the peril of the indigenous ones (Robert, Besong & Dibie, 2016; Robert & Dibie, 2015; Adegbite, 2003).

As Adegbite (2003) confirms, the elite inculcate negative attitude in their children and wards, such that the latter too begin to hold, exhibit and spread negative attitude towards their indigenous languages, cultures and systems. These elitist train their children and wards also un/consciously transfer same or even worse attitude to others around and under them. Prah (2009) blames African elite for imitating and presenting Western ways of life to their African subjects as better ways of life, failing to develop African systems to be like the worthwhile and cherished Western ways of life that one could think of. The attitude of exclusively upholding Western languages, cultures and societal systems at the expense of indigenous ones, as exhibited by Nigerian elite and their children, wards and disciples, shows the extent to which they are influenced and plagued by Western impositions, westernisation, toxic impact of globalisation and wholesome cultural and linguistic imperialism (Bamgbose, 1985; Prah, 2009; Robert & Dibie, 2015; Robert & Besong, 2016; Robert, Besong & Dibie, 2016).

As Gethin et al. (2021) note, in this era of globalisation, cultural anxiety and economic insecurity are major sources of worry among people. The worry "has allowed 'populism' to irrevocably take root in our political systems" (p. 3). And, the worry followed the emergence of "a new form of 'elitism' over

several decades" (Gethin et al., 2021, p. 3). By confirming that Western democracies face political crises in this age of globalisation, Gethin et al. (2021) implicitly point out that globalisation has not been able to salvage the democracies that most non-western nations look up to, or even imbibe totally. They aver that tackling these crises among the western nations 'requires giving back a voice to the many citizens,' who feel misrepresented by extant 'democratic institutions' (Gethin et al., 2021, p. 3). They rightly suggest that 'sufficient ambitious and credible platforms' have to be created 'to convince them [the elite] that globalisation and technical change can serve the interests of more than a narrow minority' (Gethin et al., 2021, p. 3). Their suggestion is apt and adopted by this present study.

**Schools and the Underdevelopment of WAL: Nigeria in Focus**

Schools in WA continue to sustain colonial superimpositions without minding the implications of doing so. Colonial impositions are trends posing untold challenges to WALs. Formal education in contemporary Nigeria is given using English language exclusively at the expense of indigenous languages. The national language policy in Nigeria is a mere statutory proclamation without practical reality. It is not practised. Unlike the provisions of the national language policy, indigenous languages are neglected and not used for educating learners in early and middle years of education. The worst case obtains at the tertiary level. Nigerian leaders do not recognise and utilise the prospects of ILs and indigenous knowledge (IK). Rather, they have lost their sense of responsibility and the populace abjure patriotism. There is need to look into our ILs and deploy them for remedies to different issues confronting our (West) African societies. Othieno (2014) maintains that indigenous languages (ILs) are the best mechanisms for teaching children. As such, we need to harness our ILs in teaching and for other purposes.

Teachers' behaviour influences or impacts on students' performance (Baumrind, 1967; Ubong, 2021). The attitude of teachers towards WALs poses severe threat to the development of these languages in particular and the region as a whole. The linguistic behaviour of WA teachers influences young learners into disregarding or having negative conception of and attitude towards ILs. The kind of socialisation offered by teachers to young people about ILs either makes or mars the development of these languages and their problem-solving potentials. Most of them pass on Eurocentric perspectives on African languages and cultures to the young ones, making them see nothing good about anything is African (Prah, 2009).

In the same vein, the teaching method and the teaching philosophy of the teacher either make or mar learning objectives and achievements. One major school based trend is the practice of designing and having a curriculum that promotes alien languages and cultures over the indigenous ones. WA schools (teachers and school authorities) fail to duly correct Eurocentric wrongs, tales, myths and falsehoods about and against Africa. Leaving the African child empty without well grounded and blended formal knowledge on realities, happenings and practices in African and global contexts is a negative school based trend. Deficient curriculum, which has minor or nothing on Africa cum Africanisation, is a negative school based trend hampering the development of WALs. Another challenge is the unwillingness of the (West) African teacher to teach the African pupil or student in (West) African ways, and expose them to the hidden realities about (West) Africa and its belongings.

Lack of the needed knowledge, incompetence, poor training, corrupt practices, and lack of teaching aids are some other school based trends affecting the development of WALs. Lack of interest in and insufficient research into issues affecting WALs are also school based issues affecting the development of WALs. Lack of teaching aids, over reliance on Western and theoretical knowledge affects the development of WALs too. Shortage of manpower in the field of WALs constitutes a serious threat to the development of these languages. Lack of logistics is another challenge to the development of WALs. Besides constraining these languages, the trends also manifest as current research trends foiling research-based and scholarly development of these languages. In addition, the trends of globalisation, westernisation, neo-colonisation, culture imperialism, indigenous language endangerment and attrition, and elitism also obtain in the school environment. It is imperative to note that these last mentioned sets of the issues or trends obtain both at home and school.

## Towards Developing and Sustaining WALs and Cultures

Nkereuwem and Robert (2023) rightly observe that endangering indigenous languages for the alien ones is problematic and harmful to various aspects of the systems of the society. They add that addressing the associated problems requires falling back to various indigenous mechanisms, such as ILs and oral literature (Nkereuwem & Robert, 2023). As such, it is important to make judicious use of ILs, indigenous knowledge and other indigenous systems, such as oral literature, history, philosophy, informal education, etc. in order to attain meaningful development (Nkereuwem & Robert, 2023). As Agbo (2011) notes, 'the quest for development in Africa as a whole and Nigeria in particular can be attained when the indigenous leaders resolve identity crisis and create a new culture' (p. 214). Resolving identity crisis requires getting rid of or reducing the trends of endangerment, attrition, and abandonment of ILs and other indigenous systems that make up the macrocosmic indigenous culture and societal systems of every given society.

Al-Zo'by (2019) discusses UN's globalised framework for sustainable development policies on culture as a development strategy. The study reveals that there are limits to culture-based sustainable development strategies. It concludes that promoting and incorporating culture into sustainable development strategies depicts the confining of culture to neo-liberal globalisation discourse. There is no doubt that using culture as a strategy for sustainable development involves using language, a communicative instrument of culture, in ways that allow for meaningful and comprehensive national, regional and global development, peace, integration, intergroup and interpersonal communication, and political participation and democratisation processes.

Robert (2017a&b) calls for urgent change of attitude towards indigenous systems, including ILs. He regrets that the prevailing negative attitude towards African/Nigerian indigenous systems hamper development in various regards (Robert, 2017a). Eurocentric perception of and attitude towards African culture and systems are the bane of wrong and misleading perspectives, treatment, negligence, relegation and abandonment of ILs, oral literature and other indigenous systems among Nigerian peoples of contemporary time (Robert, 2017b). So, a change to that end would undoubtedly bring to place some significant development in various phases of the society. WA nations all need and have to pursue the change.

As Prah (2009, p. 17) observes, in preference and pursuit of Western culture, African culture with all its systems is too often than not misunderstood, perceived wrongly and dabbed variously. In his words, 'African culture tends to be regarded as museum pieces, arrested and fossilised in time' (Prah, 2009, p. 17). Eurocentric conception of African culture and indigenous systems is one negative trend confronting WALs in contemporary times. The contemporaneous uphold Western languages, culture and systems at the peril of the indigenous ones. It is to break out of from the chains of Western superimpositions that Wiredu (1980, 1993 & 1995) makes a case for conceptual decolonisation from Western superimpositions. Wiredu condemns Western superimpositions on Africa, and demands that conceptual decolonisation should be evolved, used and sustained to do away with colonialisation and neo-colonialism. One of the impositions is the linguistic preponderance of Western languages, most especially English and French.

Agbo (2011) laments the effects of and condemns Western superimpositions on Africa. Agbo goes on to say that the general consensus seems to be that without the distortions imposed by colonial hegemonies, the African peoples would have evolved unique, primordial and adaptable socio-cultural and political systems which could have purely emerged from African orientation, predicated solely on African metaphysics, African world views, and ontologies or ontological foundations. Similarly, wa Thiong'o (1981) has strongly argued for the decolonisation of the mind in African literature and politics. This implies that literature, both oral and written, could be used to decolonise African systems from the Western superimpositions brought upon Africa and its peoples by the colonialists (Nkereuwem & Robert, 2023).

Wa Thiong'o (1981) emphasises that once African literature is freed from language politics, the African's mind would be significantly decolonised. Chinweizu et al. (1980) also make a strong

argument for the decolonisation of African literature. For this study, freeing and saving African ILs and literature from colonisation implies decolonising them. The study argues that by sustainably developing and using ILs in the WA region, moderate decolonisation would be attained significantly. These languages have to be asserted from the prevailing negative trends obtained at home and school. Doing so requires making judicious use of WALs.

As Kia and Vurasi (2013) observe, 'Nigeria has never been lucky enough to have good elites, because Nigerian elites toe ethnic ties with the absence of a coherent system of choice in politics and economy' (p. 165). They are of the view that although 'everywhere, elites are viewed as essential elements of political and social life of the country, and in every country' (p. 165), those of Nigeria are otherwise. The implication of Kia and Vurasi's (2013, p. 165) quoted statement is that Western elite across ages are those behind what they have, which non-Western as well as underdeveloped Western nations do not have. Thus, WA elites are behind the underdevelopment, backwardness and nationhood challenges of their nations in the post-colonial era. The stability of society depends on its elite on one hand and 'on ways in which the elite class is organised and fits with other sectors' on the other hand (Kia & Vurasi, 2013, p. 165). The formation of elite in society is 'legitimated by their identification with the most pervasive goals in society' (Kia & Vurasi, 2013, p. 165). Regrettably, Nigerian and other (West) African elites do not identify with the most pervasive goals of their African societies. Rather, their goals are personal and those are what they consistently pursue and see to their realisation. Change is imperatively the panacea.

Studies confirm that all human activities involve language use (Besong & Robert, 2019; Mbah, 2018; Emeka-Nwobia, 2015; Dibie & Robert, 2014; Agbedo, 2011; Emeka-Nwobia, 2007; Uche, 1994). The affirmation is a simple justification of the thesis and the findings of this study. Indeed, there is no doubt that all endeavours rely on language to reveal whatever they have in stock for society and humanity. Even divinity gets unveiled through symbolic use of language. Discourses are made using language across all endeavours. Seidel (1985) has noted that 'each discourse serves as a site of struggle having a semantic space in which meanings are produced and/or challenged' (p. 45). This implies that all discourses, political, public, developmental and otherwise, involve language use for the construction of meanings and solutions to problems. Solutions to problems are first constructed ideologically before being executed pragmatically as viable or empirical solutions.

Nwankwegu and Nwode (2012) are of the view that 'effective communication is imperative for successful human relations and interactions in all spheres of life' (p. 8). It follows that ineffective communication is a challenge to various spheres of life. According to Nwode (2022), communicating effectively is essential to social, political, religious, economic and cultural studies and discourses, and to other human endeavours involving both theoretical and empirical developments. Also, in every communicative situation, there must be some shared situational knowledge that gives the communication situation a background (Nwode, 2022). The situational knowledge, which can be regarded as a communication dependent variable or condition, determines the extent to which the intended message is extended. In all cases, communication is only possible with language use. This point is given credence by Mbah (2018), who maintains 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).

Since effective use of language is imperative in all discourses (Nwankegu & Nwode, 2012), it is imperative for governments and agents of socialisation in WA to look into issues affecting ILs. Home and school based trends posing severe challenges to WALs are pervasive. In what sheds light on the foregoing, Mbah (2018) avers that 'language has no meaning in itself, but is deployed as a trigger that sets off and creates possible worlds or alternative meaning realities within a discourse situation' (p. 37). As such, it is quite true that WALs can be rightly deployed to trigger meaningful development (paradigms, approaches, ideologies, measures etc.). Nationhood issues are better understood and resolved when expressed in indigenous languages. To face the different nationhood realities and issues confronting the WA region, WALs have to be deployed, used developed, promoted the sustained accordingly.

Finally, the place of ILs in development and other endeavours is affirmed by Besong and Robert (2019), as they rightly note, 'Language is instrumental to growth, development, national, interpersonal and inter-group relations, democracy, peace and conflict resolution, every field of study and all human endeavours. The right use of language makes all these, while its wrong use mars them' (p. 1). The foregoing expressions lend credence to this study that WALs are viable mechanisms for developing the region and for finding tangible pragmatic solutions to its chronic issues that have been persistently left unresolved as a result of the continuous vain search for solutions from faraway Britain, Europe and America. These continents are never realistically ready to proffer any lasting solutions to African problems. They want to remain above Africa and sustain neo-colonialism, culture and linguistic imperialism, and international political and economic hegemonies. Thus, the fate of Africa, as a whole, and West Africa in particular, is in the hands of the indigenous leaders, elites and youths. The solutions lie within. What has to be done consistently is to simply take advantage of and deploy them rightly. The willingness to do so is the number step to finding lasting solutions to the nationhood problems confronting Africa in general and WA in particular.

## Conclusion

This study has shown that the development of West African languages is perpetually negated and thwarted by behavioural, environmental and social factors, English substitution, Pidgin and Creole, globalisation, emerging new media language, linguistic elitism, negligence, endangerment and attrition, systemic irregularities, failed parental linguistic responsibilities, and pedagogic inadequacies. Those obtained at home are more widespread, untamed and constraining to the development of these languages than those at school. Nevertheless, they all pose serious threats to the languages. Linguistic imperialism and the so-called popular cultures and languages mentality along with other trends continuously hamper the development of the indigenous languages of other nations of the world. English and French are the Western languages that have consistently superimposed on nations of the world since the days of colonialism. Given the findings, the study submits that borne not for these issues or trends, West African languages would have been far more developed than they are currently.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

(i) African indigenous leaders, elites and youths should duly rise to the challenges before them, take responsibility, and be decisive, optimistic, determined, resilient, diligent and proactive in all matters affecting their nations.

(ii) Attitudinal change, mass reorientation and cultural reformation, involving sustained campaigns by the agents of socialisation and the government, would address the issues at stake to a reasonable extent.

(iii) School curricula should be reviewed and moderately decolonised.

(iv) Ethno-religious and linguistic differences and primordial sentiments should not be used as yardsticks for intergroup and interpersonal relations and leadership criteria and choices in (West) Africa.

(v) The government of every (West) African nation should make different legislations that promote wide use and development of ILs and all indigenous systems.

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