

Language Hegemony and the Marginalization of Indigenous Voices: Barriers to Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Ekpeye Communities

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Abstract

This paper examines the critical yet often overlooked role of linguistic inequality in hindering the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the Ekpeye communities of Rivers State, Nigeria. It argues that the hegemony of the English language, reinforced by national educational policy, systematically marginalizes the Ekpeye language and, by extension, the indigenous knowledge systems and participatory voices of the Ekpeye people. Through a mixed-method of quantitative and qualitative survey conducted across Ekpeye subgroups (e.g., age, gender, occupation, education), this study demonstrates how the hegemony of the English language and the consequent marginalization of the Ekpeye language actively creates barriers to achieving the SDGs in Ekpeye communities. Specifically, it explores its impact on quality education (SDG 4), hampering inclusive and equitable quality education for inhabitants of Ekpeye communities. The findings reveal that the exclusion of the Ekpeye language from the school system is not merely a cultural loss but a significant developmental impediment. The study concludes that achieving inclusive and sustainable development in indigenous contexts like the Ekpeye nation requires a deliberate decolonization of communication frameworks. It advocates the integration of indigenous languages into governance and education as a fundamental prerequisite for genuine progress toward the SDGs.

1. Introduction

The dominant use of English within Nigeria's educational system perpetuates the systemic marginalization of indigenous communities, such as the Ekpeye people of Rivers State in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This linguistic exclusion creates a significant barrier to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, which promises inclusive and equitable quality education for all. In Ekpeye communities, the postcolonial model of English-medium education remains the norm and it primarily targets the children and the youth. Many elders in Ekpeye rural communities who could not acquire formal education at a young age are largely living outside the mainstream information network, unaware of the broader news and knowledge that shape society. This approach effectively marginalizes adults and non-speakers of English, denying them access to crucial knowledge and undermining indigenous participation in national and global spheres of communication, education, governance, and culture.

In addition to this marginalization, the hegemony of the English language maintained through power structures like government, education, media etc, devalues and displaces local languages. The effects of this have been stigmatization and internalized inferiority complex with regard to the transmission of their language to the younger generation. Speakers of marginalized languages as it is often the case in Ekpeye, usually feel that their language is 'backward', 'primitive' and 'useless'. Elleh (2022), recounted his conversation with his teenage son who asked why he was not taught the Ekpeye language while growing up. Elleh responded to his son that the Ekpeye language would not be useful to him, being an American, and that there was no need learning a language that will not be beneficial (Elleh, 2022). This is the predominant view among Ekpeye parents as a direct consequence of a systematic relegation of their language to the background. Parents seeing no economic or social value in their heritage Ekpeye language, have become reluctant in passing it on to the younger generations. Of course this stems from the promotion of English as a 'civilized' and superior tool for social mobility while systematically denigrating indigenous Ekpeye. This creates a violation of the 'leave no one behind' pledge of the SDGs, making the investigation of language-based exclusion a matter of ethical and practical imperative for achieving SDGs.

2. The Ekpeye Language and People

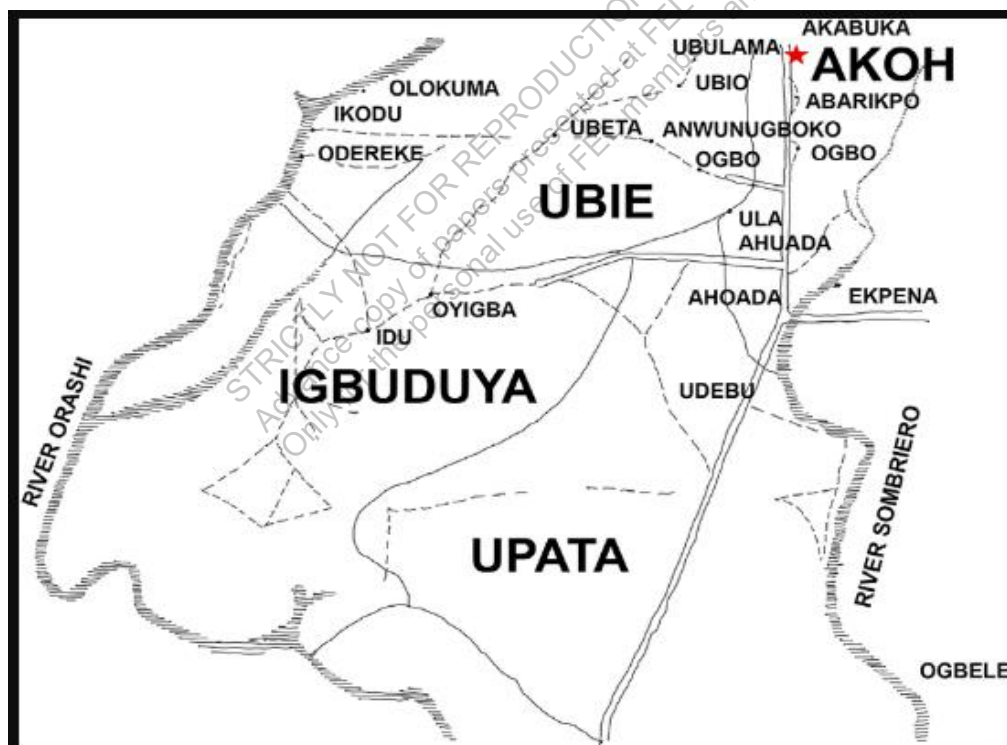
The Ekpeye people located in Ahoada-East and Ahoada-West Areas of Rivers State, Nigeria occupy a geographical land area that falls within Latitude 4.46 N, and 5.15 N, and Longitude 6.26 E and 6.45 E. They are a linguistically and culturally homogenous people. The Ekpeye language is classified as part of the Igboid language group within the larger Volta-Niger language family, also referred to as Benue-Congo (Williamson & Blench, 2000). Ekpeye is considered a distinct language within Igboid (Clark, 1969) with its own phonological and grammatical features.

The culture of traditional leadership is well-grounded in the Ekpeye political culture. The Ekpeye nation is ruled by a Traditional Head known as Eze Ekpeye L'ogbo. The Ekpeye kingdom is divided into administrative units or clans called Igbu. There were four major Igbu namely: Ubie, Akoh, Igbuduya and Upata. Igbu Akoh, Igbu Igbuduya and Igbu Upata have been further divided to yield Igbu Ehuda, Igbu Ugbobi and Igbu Olukwọ respectively, bringing them to seven Igbu presently. The different Igbu are made up of communities or villages (Ula) and each community is headed by an elected chief [known as Eze-New- Ula].

There is no official population figure for Ekpeye. However, the 2006 Nigeria Census projected for Rivers State in 2025 puts the population of Ahoada-East, predominantly inhabited by the indigenous people of Ekpeye at 277,105, and Ahoada-West at 415,725 with more than two-third of indigenous inhabitants as the Ekpeye people. Consequently, it is convenient to state that the Ekpeye people outnumber 400,000. Despite their rich heritage, they grapple with language hegemony-the dominance of English language-which marginalizes their indigenous voices and impedes progress toward the actualization of Sustainable Development Goals in their communities.

Figure 1. Map of Ekpeye territory drawn after the Colonial Intelligence Report on Ekpeye 1933, and showing the four major Igbu (Akoh, Ubie, Igbuduya and Upata)

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3. Research Objectives

- To investigate how the dominance of the English language in educational sphere perpetuate the marginalization of the Ekpeye language and its speakers.
- To analyze how this linguistic inequality acts as a critical barrier to the effective participation, inclusion, and sustainable development of Ekpeye communities, ultimately hindering the achievement of SDGs.
- To provide recommendations for integrating the Ekpeye language into development frameworks that foster local participation in global information mainstream.

4. Theoretical Framework

This work is anchored on Robert Phillipson's (1992) theory of Linguistic Imperialism, which itself draws from Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony. Gramsci characterized hegemony as the 'spontaneous consent' given by a subordinate group to the direction imposed by a dominant group, a state achieved by internalizing the dominant group's values through cultural institutions.

Phillipson's framework identifies how English, as a colonial language in Nigeria, has long been promoted as a 'civilized' and superior tool for social mobility. Its dominance in education, international business, and finance creates immense pressure for its adoption while systematically denigrating indigenous languages. Features of this imperialism include the prioritization of the dominant language and the construction of its ideological prestige. In Ekpeye communities, this has led to the internalized worldview of English's superiority, with catastrophic consequences: language endangerment, the devaluation of local knowledge in curricula, cultural dislocation, and a loss of cognitive justice. Phillipson's theory provides a relevant lens for countering hegemonic English education in this context.

4.1 Current Initiatives and Gaps

Efforts to counteract this trend, such as Igwe's (2020) Speak Ekpeye Fluently Language Initiative, which develops online resources to encourage language use among youth, are commendable. However, such initiatives primarily target a demographic that is both young and has internet access. A majority of native Ekpeye speakers reside in rural areas with limited internet connectivity and high illiteracy rates. Crucially, most community members are not literate in their own language, rendering online resources ineffective even when available. This underscores an urgent need to bring foundational literacy programs directly to the communities.

5. Methodology and Data Collection

A mixed-method approach was adopted, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews. The quantitative survey employed stratified and purposive sampling to ensure representation across Ekpeye subgroups (e.g., age, gender, occupation, education) and its four major administrative clans (Igbo).

Given their role as community custodians and opinion leaders, chiefs and women leaders were specifically selected. Among younger participants (aged 18 and above), only those with formal education were targeted to ensure the ability to comprehend and provide relevant information on the SDGs. Consequently, respondents were required to have at least a secondary education to reliably interpret the principles of the goals.

Despite financial constraints that limited the scale of this self-funded study, 400 questionnaires were distributed across the clans (100 each). A total of 287 were returned, yielding a 71.75% response rate. The return rates per clan were: Akoh (107), Upata (82), Ubie (57), and Igbuduya (41).

Complementing this, qualitative interviews were captured in the questionnaire to explore the community's specific challenges, needs, and priorities in greater depth.

6. Description of Statistics and Analysis

Statement: Out of a total of 287 responses retrieved, all 287 (100%) expressed support for the use of the Ekpeye language in schools. All respondents indicated 'yes' to the question of 'whether they would prefer to have Ekpeye language included in formal education'.

The 100% support rate is a powerful statistic. It reveals an overwhelming demand from the community for the Ekpeye language to be used in schools. This strongly supports my thesis about English language hegemony and the desire from the community to counteract marginalization which directly links to SDG 4. "By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations."

The marginalization of the Ekpeye language is a primary barrier to quality education (SDG 4). Education in a foreign language leads to poor comprehension, and cultural alienation. Using Ekpeye in schools is a prerequisite for achieving inclusive and equitable quality education.

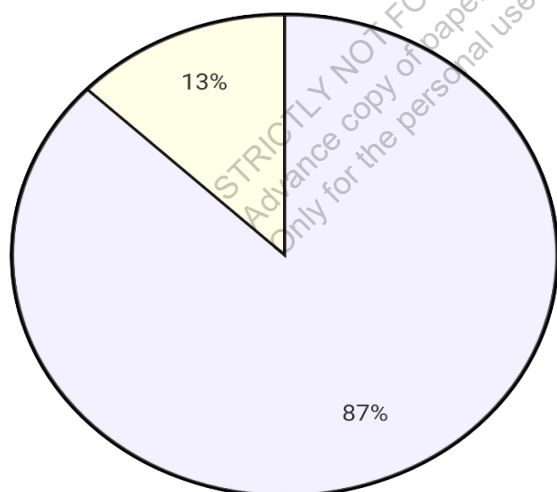
Language hegemony is a discriminatory practice. Promoting the mother tongue is an act of reducing inequality and promoting social, economic, and political inclusion. Mother-tongue-based education has a ripple effect on other SDGs:

- SDG 1 (No Poverty) & SDG 8 (Decent Work): Better education outcomes lead to better economic opportunities.
- SDG 3 (Good Health): Health information can be effectively communicated in the local language.
- SDG 11 (Sustainable Communities): Strengthening indigenous language and culture fosters resilient and sustainable communities.

On the issue of the level of awareness of the SDGs, the findings suggest a significant gap in awareness, constituting a fundamental barrier to achieving the SDGs. For example, out of a sample size of (n): 287, the sample proportion of participants claiming ignorance is $p = 250 / 287 \approx 0.871$. This can be expressed as 87.1%. The proportion of participants with knowledge of the SDGs is $1 - p = 37 / 287 \approx 0.129$ or 12.9%

The result revealed an overwhelming lack of awareness, with **250 participants (87.1%)** reported not being aware of the Sustainable Development Goals. Only **37 participants (12.9%)** indicated they were familiar with them.

Figure 2. A pie chart showing the awareness of SDGs in Ekpeye Communities (n=287)



Ignorance of SDGs = 87%

Awareness of SDGs = 13%

The overwhelming lack of awareness suggests that information about global development frameworks like the SDGs is not effectively reaching the grassroots level. The fact that such a majority is unaware of a global agenda that is hinged on 'leaving no one behind' is a stark indicator of the marginalization of Ekpeye communities. True sustainability development requires local ownership and participation. When a community is unaware of the goals, it cannot consciously contribute to or shape them, thereby perpetuating non-inclusiveness.

The central theme emerging from the survey reveal a disconnect between global frameworks and local reality. The lack of awareness of the SDGs is a symptom of language hegemony. English being the language of education, government and information dissemination directly creates barrier to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

When asked about development priorities, an overwhelming theme emerged: the strong desire for quality education integrating the Ekpeye language into the formal education system and eradication of poverty.

The respondents correctly identify that marginalization begins with the denial of their linguistic and cultural identity in the sphere of education. This demand aligns directly with the targets of SDG 4.5 (inclusive education) and SDG 10.3 (reducing inequalities). Therefore, the path to achieving the SDGs in Ekpeye land is contingent upon reversing language hegemony.

7. Recommendations and Conclusion

Based on this analysis, the study advocates for inclusive, on-the-ground initiatives such as:

1. Creating literacy programs in the Ekpeye language for all community members.
2. Translating key SDG materials and government information into Ekpeye.
3. Establishing indigenous-language radio stations to broadcast and disseminate information widely. Undertaking these initiatives is essential to bridge existing gaps, ensure genuine inclusion, and empower the Ekpeye people to participate in their own development and the global SDG agenda.

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