



## Indigenous Language Values and Economic Development in Nigeria

### Abstract

Language is a crucial factor in nation-building, with its strategic importance being contingent on its communicative and instrumental roles. This paper critically examined indigenous language-propelled practical approaches to promoting Nigerian economic development. Specifically, it investigated how indigenous language education, paid language proficiency programmes, language certification programmes, and indigenous language-propelled tourism programmes would promote Nigerian economic advancement. Relying on linguistic capital theory, this paper argued that the application of the four approaches above would enhance Nigerian economic progress. Using data from existing literature and conceptual analysis, it discovered a positive correlation between the four approaches and Nigeria's economic development. Thus, the findings showed that proper deployment of the four approaches would improve Nigeria's economic development. Subsequently, this paper concluded that sustainable economic development in Nigeria requires a symbiotic relationship between Nigerian indigenous languages and Western languages, given the contemporary globalisation agenda; a synergy grounded on cultural autonomy and responsible linguistic interdependence. Subsequently, this paper recommended modifying Nigerian education policy to accord indigenous languages their pride of place in national life, with benefits accruing.

**Keywords:** *Communication, Economic development, Indigenous languages, Instrument, Symbolic power*

**Bartholomew Nnaemedo**

Department of Religious  
Studies/Philosophy

Abia State University, Uturu.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2691-7890>

**Corresponding Author's Email:**

[nnaemedo.bartholomew@abiastateuniversity.edu.ng](mailto:nnaemedo.bartholomew@abiastateuniversity.edu.ng)

**Date Received:** 28th March, 2026

**Date Accepted:** 30th March, 2026

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19387176>

### Introduction

One question that has agitated the minds of thinkers down the ages is one concerning the relationship between language and economic development. It focused on whether language is merely a communicative tool or whether it also serves as an instrument. Interestingly, some scholars have made honest efforts to respond to it. One such scholar was Bourdieu (1986, 1991), who, through his linguistic capital theory, conceived

language as a symbolic capital. Another effort in that direction was Halliday (1994, 1975), who viewed language as a resource for making meaning. Others rose from an ontological stand, and viewed language as a house of being (Heidegger, 1947), a form of life (Wittgenstein, 1953), essentially constitutive of institutional reality (Searle, 1995), and as what enhances shared meaning and fusion of horizon (Gadamer, 2004). From all these studies, one can decipher an explicit and implicit

reference to the instrumental role of language. The explicit role is evident in Bourdieu (1986, 1991) and Halliday (1994, 1975), while the implicit reference is apparent in the ontological view of language, as no economic development is possible without a proper interpretation and understanding of reality through the house of being – language. Likewise, people need to fuse their horizons to pursue and maintain the same economic objectives. Besides, one cannot develop people without an insight into their lives. Therefore, this paper sustains that Nigeria's indigenous language education, paid language proficiency programmes, language certification programmes, and indigenous language-propelled tourism are some of the practical ways of enhancing the economic development of Nigeria.

Admittedly, though some scholars had already researched language and economic development, there exists a knowledge gap in the concrete application of the aforementioned ways to economic development in Nigeria. Therefore, this paper sets out to bridge the above lacuna by examining the relationship between them and economic development in Nigeria.

### **Conceptualising Language**

Language is a subject matter of many academic fields, such as linguistics, anthropology, sociology, mass communication, philosophy, and so on. In philosophy, some scholars viewed language as one of the most common features of humans, as their daily activities are language-driven. For instance, Heidegger (1973) noted that man speaks always, whether awake or

asleep. However, language is not limited to the vocal dimension. Humans also represent their thoughts symbolically. It implies that language does not only involve vocal signs but also a symbolic representation of human thoughts, events, and things. Considered from the above backdrop, language is "that activity with which man, through vocal or written signs, puts himself in communion with his peers (or with some intelligent being, for instance God) to express his own sentiments, desires, or knowledge" (Mondin, 1991, p.133). The above definition points to the communicational dimension of language. In this role, language constitutes an information medium, a conduit enabling messages to pass among humans, as well as enabling humans to communicate with spiritual beings in the religious sphere. Besides serving a communicational role, language also performs expressive and descriptive functions (Mondin, 1991). It is language that helps humans to communicate with others, express their views and emotions, and describe the state of affairs.

### **Constitutive Nature of Language**

Further, language goes beyond the above conception to point to something more ontological, as language is viewed as a faculty in humans (Heidegger, 1973; Mondin, 1991). As a human faculty, language is humans' capability for speech and symbolic activities. Therefore, language is also constitutive of the being of man. Underscoring this, Mondin (1991) affirmed that "language denotes the function, the capacity with which man is naturally gifted to express

himself and to communicate with his own peers through the word" (p.151). The fallout from the above affirmation is that language is not something unnatural to man.

Additionally, it is significant to observe that Mondin's view of language above verifies Heidegger (1947), who had earlier conceived language as the house of being, indicating that language is the abode encasing being and the aperture for accessing it. Therefore, being reveals itself to the world in and through language. Ipso facto, the world derives intelligibility and meaningfulness in and through language. The above concept of language also confirms Chomsky (1965), who argued for an innate or genetic source of language, a theory that advocates and sustains generative and universal grammar. Also, Searle's (1995) view that language is essentially constitutive of institutional reality aligns with the constitutive nature of language, as language defines institutional structures such as money, marriage, governments, and property. Wittgenstein (1953) also supports the constitutive nature of language as it conceives language as a form of life and argues that "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (P1, 19). It implies that understanding is contextual, and speaking a language is part of an activity. So, one requires a speech community to understand a community, depicting Wittgenstein's theory of language games.

### **Language as an Instrumental Tool**

Language is not only a communicative tool but also an instrumental one. It implies that language is a social resource. As a resource, language

represents a symbolic capital that confers symbolic power, subsequently convertible into economic capital. The above view is glaring in Bourdieu's (1991) linguistic capital theory, where he viewed language as an asset or symbolic capital. Halliday (1994, 1975) also adopted a similar stance by viewing language as a resource for making meaning and a meaning potential. Likewise, Halliday (2003) argued that language is a reality which one learns by learning how to mean. All these points are related to language as an instrument.

### **Indigenous Languages and Development**

It is also important to look at works dealing with indigenous languages and development, especially those related to Africa. Even though the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis or linguistic relativity hypothesis was not about Africa, it is still very relevant in this discourse as it explains how the structure of a people's language shapes their thought and their perception of the world (Whorf, 1956). Hence, a people's real world is to a great extent unconsciously built up on their language habits, and their language habits predispose their choices of interpretation (Sapir, 1929). For the above reason, Whorf (1956) insists that people should dissect nature along lines laid down by their native languages. Following the value of language above, particularly the place of a people's language in shaping reality, Fanon (2008) critiqued epistemic violence. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (2006) made a case against any form of linguistic domination. Wiredu (1995) sued for conceptual decolonisation.

Hountondji's (1997) call for Africa to embrace endogenous knowledge against depending on the Western knowledge system is also a support for the use of indigenous languages for development, though he did not use the concepts endogenous and indigenous interchangeably. According to him, endogenous embodies knowledge originated, inherited, identified by a people as theirs, while the term indigenous always has a derogatory connotation emanating from the West. In this denigrating connotation, he noted that indigenous refers to a specific historic experience, precisely one of integration of autochthonous cultures into a world-wide 'market' in which these perforce are pushed down to inferior positions. He stated that 'endogenous' becomes 'indigenous' in and through such a world-widening process (Antony, n.d.). So, the above distinction notwithstanding, ordinarily the two terms point to the same thing.

### **Concrete Ways of Using Nigerian Indigenous Languages as an Economic Resource**

There are many practical ways of using the Nigerian indigenous languages for sustainable development. These diverse ways include indigenous language education, paid language proficiency programmes, language certification programmes, and indigenous language-propelled tourism.

### **Indigenous Languages Education**

Language is not merely a medium of communication. It is also constitutive of reality, implying that it is crucial for interpreting and understanding reality, as evident in the Heideggerian notion of

language as the house of being (Heidegger, 1947). If language in general is significant for understanding the world, indigenous languages play a more significant role in that direction, as they are the languages of people's daily engagements. Besides, following Wittgenstein's (1953) concept of language as a form of life and his language game, which argues that reality is socially constituted, one requires an understanding of a social setting to understand and interpret reality within a given community. Interestingly, indigenous languages readily offer this much-needed contextual understanding and interpretation.

Based on the above submission, it is glaring how using Nigerian indigenous languages as formal languages for teaching and learning could promote sustainable development in Nigeria. The use of Nigerian indigenous languages as prescribed above is important for improved teaching and learning, as the structure of a people's language shapes their thought and world perception (Whorf, 1956). Besides, their real world is to a great extent unconsciously built up on their language habits, and their language habits predispose their choices of interpretation (Sapir, 1929). Hence, indigenous languages are critical to accessing reality, a view supported by Whorf's (1956) argument that people should dissect nature along lines laid down by their native languages.

Presently, in Nigeria, English is the official language of formal instruction. Subsequently, teaching and learning are done in and through the English language. So, following the significance

*Indigenous Language Values and Economic Development in Nigeria*

of language as constitutive of reality as presented above, it is crucial to use Nigerian indigenous languages as the languages of formal academic instruction. The adoption would promote effective teaching and learning and enhance the economic value of Nigerian languages, as language is a social resource convertible into economic capital. Of course, the above argument corroborates Bourdieu's (1991), who conceived language as an asset or symbolic capital. Likewise, it confirms Halliday (1994, 1975), who viewed language as a resource for making meaning and a meaning potential.

Under the situation above, Nigerian indigenous languages would no longer be viewed as inferior vis-à-vis other Western languages, such as English, French, German, and so on. Rather, they would be considered as enjoying equal status with them. This new understanding of the status of Nigerian languages will not only save them from extinction, but also goes deeper to create and expand job opportunities in Nigeria, as emphasis on indigenous languages would imply demand for more hands to teach them.

Another important fact about language is that it embodies people's culture and worldview. Thus, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (2006) contends that "language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history" (p.15). It means that language is a repository containing basic facts about people. So, in people's language is archived their history, thinking pattern, and vision of reality. These repositories are a basic matrix for understanding and

interpreting people. Therefore, they offer instructional material for learning about a people. Then, as teaching and learning are facilitated through instructional materials, the adoption of Nigerian indigenous languages will also lead to the production of more indigenous language-based instructional materials, which would subsequently impact the economy of Nigeria. The increase in productivity also has positive implications for the labour force in the affected industries, as an increase in production would require an increase in the labour force. Even in a situation of mechanised production or where robots are used instead of human beings, it will also affect the labour force in the affected industries, which will resultantly affect the economy of the nation. In a situation where the materials are imported, the Nigerian economy will be positively affected by the fact that import duties are also a source of revenue to the nation. Additionally, the need to domesticate the industries producing the above instructional material will not only encourage greater participation of Nigerians in their production but could also lead to indigenisation of the industries, thereby providing employment opportunities to Nigerians. Furthermore, it can lead to optimal utilisation of local resources to make up for those that are not importable, and promote creativity and entrepreneurship, given that necessity is the mother of invention.

Besides, languages enhance common understanding and shared vision. Hence, Gadamer argued that mutual understanding arises from the fusion of

horizons and shared meaning. Likewise, Taylor viewed open dialogue and predefined social scripts as the platforms for the formation and shaping of identities, respectively. If language in general offers the above advantage, the use of indigenous languages offers more, as they are the languages of people's daily interactions. Subsequently, teaching and learning in Nigerian indigenous languages would have a practical economic impact on the use of online learning packages for learning various languages. Today, there are many such packages. However, with the adoption of Nigerian languages as the official medium of instruction in schools, people will be encouraged to create similar packages to facilitate their understanding. The creation will not only impact the economy of the creators but will also have a cumulative effect as it will improve the economy of the website owners, as well as those of network companies, such as MTN, AIRTEL, to name but a few. This improvement arises because access to the online material requires data provided by the network establishments. The more people access the online materials, the more data they consume, which subsequently implies an improved economy for the nation and all connected with the process. Therefore, using Nigerian languages as official languages of academic instruction is one of the ways of utilising language as a resource towards sustainable development of the nation, as it presents language as a marketable asset, which will positively impact other sectors of the economy.

However, it is crucial to note that emphasis on indigenous language education does not call for a total repudiation of Western and non-Nigerian languages. Instead, it is a call to give Nigeria's indigenous languages their pride of place in domestic and official engagements in Nigeria. So, it calls for a symbiotic relationship between them, one grounded on what Fricker (2007) calls epistemic justice. It is a recognition that Nigerian indigenous languages enjoy equal validity vis-à-vis Western languages, and so deserve linguistic autonomy and should never be marginalised under any guise.

### **Paid Language Programmes and Language Proficiency Certification Programmes**

As a social resource, language represents a symbolic capital. Here, Bourdieu (1986) viewed symbolic capital as capital, that is, "apprehended symbolically, in a relationship of knowledge or, more precisely, of misrecognition and recognition, presupposes the intervention of the habitus, as a socially constituted cognitive capacity" (p.255). There is a symbiotic relationship between symbolic capital and other forms of capital: social, cultural, and economic. The rapport lies in the fact that, whereas symbolic capital derives its root from them, they in turn derive their validation from symbolic capital. Instances of symbolic capital are intellectual property, trade mark, reputation, certification, etc. Through symbolic capital, one obtains proficiency and competence to perform certain acts. Thus, symbolic capital confers symbolic power. Paid language programmes and

*Indigenous Language Values and Economic Development in Nigeria*

language proficiency certification programmes are two of the ways of obtaining this symbolic power.

Paid language programmes entail learning Nigerian languages as a prerequisite for entrance into Nigeria, as is the case in some other countries, such as Germany, France, Italy, to name but a few. With the above programmes, the persons concerned acquire competences to work in the designated places. Likewise, when such is in place in Nigeria, entrants into Nigeria first learn the language of the respective community in which they desire to work to acquire competence in the language. This competence, now subsisting as symbolic power, is convertible into symbolic capital and subsequently economic capital, as it makes the new entrants employable at the place. The above development will also impact the Nigerian economy greatly, as it would reduce unemployment, given that the facilitation of the programmes will require a workforce, mostly indigenes, to achieve it.

Furthermore, when there are employment opportunities, there is a high probability of a reduction in crimes and insecurity plaguing the nation, with their resultant retrogression, economic instability, loss of lives and property, as the majority of those who would have taken to such unpatriotic behaviours will be meaningfully engaged. Of course, such engaged minds are domains of creativity and progression vis-a-vis idle minds, which most often are considered as a safe terrain for all kinds of evil machinations. The argument above is further supported by fragile state theory,

which maintains that when a state fails to provide its citizens with basic needs and expectations, it renders itself a fragile state. Consequently, it exposes its citizens to five clusters of fragility indicators: violence, lack of access to justice for all, ineffective, unaccountable, and exclusive institutions; economic exclusion and instability; and inability to prevent and adjust to socioeconomic and environmental shocks and disasters (Mcloughlin & Idris, 2016; Nnaemedo & Ugwu, 2025). Under a fragile state, development is the first casualty. However, when a state is strong, it is economically viable. Paid language programmes are sure to confer competencies that would provide such viability, since they offer citizens job opportunities leading to economic empowerment and vitality.

Another way of obtaining the symbolic power translatable into economic capital is through language proficiency certification programmes, which aim at ensuring that new entrants into a country have basic language proficiency before the country grants them work or study access. Unlike paid language programmes, which could be done within the country the entrant wants to study or work, Language proficiency certification programmes are a requirement for applying to work or study in countries requiring it. Today, there are many such programmes globally, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) required in the United States of America and Canada. There is also the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), a global test that measures people's ability to use English. It is

commonly required for employment, migration and university admission in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America, and Ireland. Also, there is *Diplôme d'Études en Langue Française* (DELF)- Diploma in French Language Studies, required for studies, scholarship, and employment in France. Also, there is *Hànyǔ Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì* (HSK) - "Chinese Proficiency Test", demanded of those wishing to work or study in China.

Language proficiency certification programmes confer language proficiency on those who acquire it, which subsequently improves their market value, especially among those needing such competence. This competence makes them employable, thereby converting the symbolic power they possess into symbolic capital and ultimately economic capital. Such helps to improve their countries' economy, given the financial accruals from the applicants all over the world. Of course, because this financial value trickles from individuals, one may erroneously overlook the amount to which they add when brought together. Besides, they also serve as sources of income for individuals. In fact, it could be likened to a case of little drops of water that grow into a mighty ocean. For instance, outside the amount paid to the government, there are other related services which are not within the jurisdiction of the government. Other agencies and individuals run such processes as online lectures for prospective candidates for these examinations. By so doing, the programme also helps to improve their

income. Beyond financial empowerment, language proficiency certification programmes also provide the citizens of countries where they are run with job opportunities, as they require human resources to manage. Understandably, the demand for the workforce increases with an increase in the number of applicants in the countries running the programmes, which at the same time results in greater or improved productivity, with its attendant economic boost.

### **Indigenous Language-Propelled Tourism**

As a social resource, language is a cultural capital. Bourdieu (1986) conceived cultural capital as comprising all capabilities, based on resources, knowledge, and culture. Significantly, he noted that, like other forms of capital, cultural capital is convertible into economic capital. Such is evident from the fact that cultural heritages are not only recreational facilities but, at the same time, sources of economic growth to different nations in the world. Tourist centres are one of these cultural heritages.

Presently, in Nigeria, there are many places of tourist attractions, such as Zuma Rock and River Niger-River Benue Confluence in the North-Central; Yankari National Park and Bima Hills in the North-East; Ancient Nok Settlement and Agungu Fishing Festival Site in the North-West; National War Museum, Ojukwu Bunker, Ezioba cave, Ogbaukwu Cave, Igbo-Ukwu Archaeological sites, Cathedral Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity Onitsha, Maria Assumpta Cathedral Owerri, and Immaculate Conception Cathedral

Okigwe in the South-East; Benin Bronze casting workshop, Obudu Mountain Resort, and International Pilgrimage Centre, Elele in the South-South; Oke Maria Pilgrimage Centre, Lekki Conservation Centre, National Theatre, Fajuyi Memorial Park, and Olumo Rock in the South-West, to name but a few.

Language plays a great role in tourism as it confers certain competences on tourist guides, who in turn translate the competences into symbolic power and subsequently to symbolic capital and economic capital. Hence, the competence confers on the tourist guide the symbolic power to lead and instruct tourists as they visit various sites and historical scenes. For instance, in Israel, every arrangement for pilgrimage includes a provision of a tourist guide. Usually, sometimes tourists do not understand the language of the country they visit for pilgrimage. It is this tourist guide that takes them to the various places they are to visit and explains to them things they need to know as they travel along the road, for sites to behold are not limited to the specific sites they stop over, but also the significant places they pass as they travel to these sites.

In the same way, tourists visiting Nigeria need a tourist guide with language competence to direct them as they visit prominent locations in the country. This language competence, in turn, will offer job opportunities to Nigerian citizens and, accordingly, provide them with financial support, which would positively impact the Nigerian economy. Additionally, the Nigerian languages could also play an economic role in hotel management, as tourists also need people who are at

home with the language to help them know more about the hotel environment, which will subsequently make them feel relaxed. The same applies to the airport. Tourists need immigration and airport staff to make them feel at home in the environment. These staff, though their services are short, unlike those of a tourist guide, contribute immensely to ensuring the overall success of tourists' visits. Thus, language competence is always taken into consideration in employing staff to work in an airport and places of tourist attractions. It implies that this language competence translates into symbolic power and symbolic capital and subsequently into economic capital by promoting employment and the economy of the staff and the nation at large.

### Conclusion

This paper focused on some indigenous language-driven practical approaches to enhancing economic development in Nigeria. The approaches include engaging in indigenous language education, paid language programmes, language proficiency certification programmes, and indigenous language-propelled tourism. Centrally, this paper argues that the practical application of the four above-mentioned approaches would enhance Nigerian economic advancement exceedingly.

This paper notes that engaging in indigenous languages education in Nigeria would promote teaching and learning, leading to academic competence, as the learning process rests on people's language structure, thinking patterns, vision of reality and other linguistic repositories, which shape their thought and world

perception. This academic competence confers symbolic power on beneficiaries, which subsequently translates to economic capital.

Paid language programmes and language proficiency certification programmes are other practical ways of attaining academic competence and proficiency with their attendant symbolic power, which is, in the long run, convertible into economic capital. The veracity of the above claim is contingent on the fact that attainment of academic competence promotes employability, thereby impacting Nigeria's economy constructively.

Nigeria's indigenous languages are critical to tourism as they confer certain competences on tourist guides, who in turn translate the competences into symbolic power and subsequently to symbolic, cultural, and economic capital, respectively. Thus, places of tourist attractions are not only recreational facilities but at the same time sources of Nigerian economic development.

Therefore, this paper concludes that sustainable economic development in Nigeria requires a healthy marriage of indigenous language and other languages used in Nigeria, given the contemporary globalisation agenda and grounded on cultural autonomy and responsible linguistic interdependence. Hence, it recommends adapting Nigerian education policy to accord indigenous languages their pride of place in national life.

### References

Antony, A.K. (n.d.). Endogenous knowledge\_ Paulin Hountondji. In D. Pathak, *Contemporary*

- social theory*.  
<https://ebooks.inflibnet.ac.in/socp2/>.  
 Bourdieu, P. (1986). Forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp.241-258). Greenwood.  
 Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Polity Press.  
 Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. MIT Press.  
 Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, white masks* (R. Philcox, Trans.). Grove Press. (Original work published in 1952).  
 Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.  
 Gadamer, H-G. (2004). *Truth and method*. (J. W. and D. G. Marshall, Trans). Continuum International Publishing Group (Original work published in 1960).  
 Halliday, M.A.K. (1975). *Learning how to mean: Exploration in the development of language*. Edward Arnold  
 Halliday, M.A.K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar* (2<sup>ND</sup> ed.). Edward Arnold  
 Halliday, M.A.K. (2003). On the architecture of human language. In J.J. Webster (Ed.), *On Language and Linguistics*. (vol. 3, pp 1-29).  
 Heidegger, M. (1947). Letter on humanism. In D.F. Krrell (Ed.), *Basic writings* (pp.193-242). Harper and Row.  
 Heidegger, M. (1971). *On his way to language*. Harper and Row.  
 Heidegger, M. (1973). *Moving towards language*. Milano.

*Indigenous Language Values and Economic Development in Nigeria*

- Hountondji, P.J. (1997). *Endogenous knowledge; Research trails*. ODESRIA.
- Hountondji, P. J. (2009). Knowledge of Africa, knowledge by Africans: Two perspectives on African studies. *RCCS Annual Review*, 1. <https://www.ces.uc.pt/publicacoes/annualreview/media>.
- Mcloughlin, C., & Idris, I. (2016). *Fragile states: Topic guide*. University of Birmingham: Governance and Social Development Resource Centre.
- Mondin, B. (1991). *Philosophical anthropology*. Urbana University Press.
- Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. (2006). *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. Zimbabwe Publishing House (Original work published in 1986).
- Nnaemedo, B., & Ugwu, S. (2025). Insecurity and educational service delivery in Nigeria: Okigwe senatorial zone experience (2015-2023). *Advance Journal of Current Research* 10(10), 1-20.
- Sapir, E. (1929). The status of linguistics as a science, *language*, 5: 207-19.
- Searle, J.R. (1995). *The construction of social reality*. The Free Press.
- Taylor, C. (1994). The politics of recognition. In *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*. In A. Gutmann (Ed.). Princeton University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical investigations*. McMillan.
- Whorf, B.L. (1956). *Language, thought, and reality: Selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. (J.B. Carroll, Ed.). MIT Press.