

MAKING TIV LANGUAGE PERFORM OPTIMALLY BY LEVERAGING THE NINLAN INITIATIVES: A POLITICAL DESIDERATUM

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Introduction

The Tiv language, spoken predominantly by the Tiv people in central Nigeria, is a vibrant expression of the rich culture, identity, and history of up to six million people (Alyebo, 2015). Yet, despite its richness and great potential for growth as a language of vast educational, communication and commercial value, Tiv faces challenges that are limiting its growth and optimal performance. This opinion paper examines the role of education, technology, and cultural preservation efforts in ensuring that Tiv continues to thrive as both a spoken and written language for future generations. It highlights the strategic initiatives of the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN), Aba, in favour of Tiv language and underscores the political imperative of supporting and expanding these and other efforts to make the Tiv language a great enabler of social, educational, technological, cultural and economic advancement for the speakers of the language and Nigeria.

The Survival of the Tiv language in an English-dominated multilingual and globalised society

Language is the essence of any culture. It encapsulates not only ways of communication but also values, traditions, and shared histories. In a highly multilingual country like Nigeria, with over five hundred recorded languages, the competition for survival is fierce (Blench, 2016; Ethnologue, 2025). This is even more so in a globalised world in which the English language has become increasingly dominant and a threat to smaller

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languages. For the Tiv people, the Tiv language holds ancestral knowledge, communal stories, and other oral literature that define their identity. Yet, as globalisation spreads, local languages like Tiv face marginalisation. English has increasingly become the language of commerce, governance, and education in Nigeria, often relegating indigenous languages, Tiv inclusive, to the background. There is also the additional pressure of Hausa on many languages of Northern Nigeria (Bohannon and Bohannon, 2017). Ensuring that Tiv can perform optimally means fostering a balance where the language is respected, used and promoted actively within Benue State and other prevalent communities.

About the domination of Tiv and other Nigerian languages by the English language within Nigeria, it must be emphasised that the fate of the various languages is squarely in the hands of the owners of these languages. The owners of the English language, represented by the British Government, through the British Council, have metaphorically washed their hands off the matter of the continuing endangerment and death of any Nigerian language!

In a series of roundtables from 2018 to 2020, the British Council worked with the who is who in Nigerian language studies to deconstruct the English-domain monolingual early grade education while promoting Nigerian languages - anchored multilingual education (Trudell, Barbara, 2005, 2022). Therefore, the onus is on the owners of the various languages, as well as their political representatives at all levels (town, Local Government Area, State, and Federal), to pick up the gauntlet and defend their languages.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Tiv Language

Although not one of the three major indigenous Nigerian languages of Nigeria, Tiv is a language of great importance with a lot going for it. Its estimated population of nearly six million (Alyebo, 2015; Wikipedia, 2024; Blench and Williamson, 2011) gives it a sufficient numerical strength to thrive sustainably. Croatian (5.6 million), Danish (5.5 million), Finnish (5.4 million), Norwegian (5.2 million), Slovak (5.2 million), etc., are among the notable national languages of Europe with comparative population strengths as the Tiv language. Belarusian (3.3 million), Lithuanian (3.0 million), Bosnian (2.5 million), and

Slovene (2.1 million) are national languages of European countries with much lower populations than the Tiv population. Therefore, what the above languages and languages of similar numerical strength all over the world have been enabled to achieve for their speakers and countries, the Tiv language could very well be enabled to achieve for their speakers, LGAs, states and Nigeria.

Another strength of Tiv language is that it has already gained recognition in Nigeria as one of the Nine Network Languages (NNL). The NNL - Edo, Efik, Ibibio, Fulfulde, Ijaw, Kanuri, Nupe, Tiv and Urhobo are languages of medium-scale numerical strength of native and other speakers that were adopted by the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) since the 1970s for national news broadcasting, in addition to the English language. The membership of Tiv in the NNL therefore confers the advantage of long-term nationwide radio presence and visibility that ought to work in its favour in the event of a well-orchestrated development.

One very innocuous yet potent advantage of the Tiv language is its geographical placement in the Middle Belt or North Central Zone of Nigeria, with the single most important passageway over the River Benue between the North and South of Nigeria. Makurdi hosts one of the two railway river crossings in Nigeria. Thus, the Tiv territory is a major gateway for trade, travel, agriculture and cultural exchange on both land and river, by road, railway, boat and by air travel, in the trans-Nigerian and Trans-Saharan social exchange route. Given its strategic importance, it has always attracted resident and transit businessmen and women since the dawn of the Nigerian enterprise and even before. Any wonder there has always been a substantial contingent of Igbo and other Nigerian traders in Gboko, Makurdi, Katsina-Ala, amongst other Tiv towns over the decades. These traders and their children are among the growing population of non-native speakers and purveyors of the Tiv language and culture.

Finally, the existence of indigenous speakers of Tiv language in Taraba, Plateau State, Nassarawa and Benue states makes it a multi-state language, besides the obvious facts that there are substantial Tiv-speaking people resident in Lagos, Kano and various metropolitan towns in Nigeria. Besides, the language relatives of Tiv found in Cross River (Utange) and Cameroon

(Utanga and Ugare, known as Iyon among Benue Tivs) make a compelling case for a serious investment in the development and internationalisation of Tiv language studies and cultural enterprise.

The weaknesses of the Tiv language are the same as those of the other medium strength languages in Nigeria, namely: lack of sufficient number of trained teachers, poor attitude to learning and speaking the language, lack of encouragement and scholarships for the study of the language, lack of higher level Tiv language education opportunities (only two Colleges of Education in Oju and Katsina-Ala offering NCE in Tiv language until recently), lack of learning resources, from print to digital resources, lack of employment opportunities, etc.

Strengthening Tiv through Education

One of the most effective ways to preserve and promote any language is through formal education. Currently, Tiv is not widely and substantially incorporated in the Nigerian education curriculum beyond primary schools in Tiv-speaking regions. To empower Tiv, it is essential to establish a robust curriculum that integrates Tiv as both a subject and a medium of instruction at higher levels of education. Introducing Tiv as a primary language of instruction in early childhood education can help solidify children's connection with the language. As the seminal Babs Fafunwa work and similar studies have shown, children who learn in their mother tongue during the early years perform better academically overall (Fafunwa et al, 1978; LEARN to Read, 2023). An optimal language curriculum requires teachers who are fluent in Tiv and capable of teaching it effectively. Investments in teacher training programmes can equip educators with the resources and skills necessary to teach Tiv at various educational levels. Bilingual education programmes can integrate Tiv alongside English, empowering students with multilingual skills. This approach would allow Tiv-speaking students to excel in both languages, preserving their cultural identity while enhancing their future job prospects.

Harnessing Technology for Language Preservation

Lessons learnt from several writers (Emejulu, 1992; Emejulu et al, 2016; Bitz and Emejulu, 2015) confirm that technology has immense potential to revitalise and sustain the Tiv

language. Leveraging digital tools can help Tiv speakers connect, communicate, and create content in their native language. Creating mobile applications and digital dictionaries for Tiv can enable learners of all ages to engage with the language. Digital resources, such as translation apps and interactive learning tools, can make Tiv accessible to both native speakers and non-speakers. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are effective for promoting language use among young people. Encouraging Tiv speakers to create social media content, blogs, and videos in Tiv can create a vibrant online presence for the language.

Digitising Tiv literature, folklore, and educational material in the form of e-books and audiobooks makes them accessible to a global audience. Online publishing platforms offer the opportunity to distribute Tiv literature widely, reaching new readers and learners worldwide.

Community Involvement and Cultural Festivals

Language preservation efforts should always be grounded in the community. Tiv people, especially elders and cultural custodians, with the Tor Tiv at the apex, play an essential role in engendering support, teaching, promoting, and preserving their language. Tiv cultural events, such as the rich Swange dance festivals, storytelling nights, and poetry recitations, are ideal platforms for celebrating and using Tiv in formal and informal ways. Ensuring that Tiv is prominently spoken and performed at these events reinforces its place within the culture.

Community initiatives can offer incentives for using Tiv in creative ways, such as writing competitions, spoken word events, and radio programs. This approach will appeal to younger generations and foster pride in speaking and developing the language.

Governmental and Institutional Support

Government policies are crucial for the sustainability of Tiv and other indigenous languages. Official recognition and active support can drive tangible progress. Government policies that protect and promote Tiv as an official language in its native regions would bolster its presence in schools, government offices, and media. Such policies demonstrate institutional recognition and commitment to preserving Tiv for future generations.

Establishing more radio and television programs in Tiv would encourage regular use of the language. Government or privately sponsored programs can increase awareness and engagement with Tiv, particularly if they cover current events, entertainment, and educational content.

The Introduction of Tiv Language Studies at the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN), Aba, as a Major Catalyst for Tiv Language Development

This author has argued elsewhere that one of the major strategies and milestones in the development of a language is the exposure and popularisation of that language in institutions and locations outside the home base of the language (Emejulu, 2021). The introduction of Tiv language studies at the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN), Aba, Abia State, in 2019 at the National Certificate in Education (NCE) level is reckoned as one of the most remarkable events in the growth of the language to date. Frustrated by the oddity of having only Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa languages on its regular diploma and post-graduate diploma programmes since the inception of a 'National Institute for Nigerian Languages', and desirous of expanding its programmes beyond diplomas while sorting out the lingering issue of the National Universities Commission's refusal to honour the Institute's degree awarding mandate, NINLAN decided to commence NCE programmes that included five additional languages: Efik-Ibibio, Fulfulde, Kanuri, Tiv, and Urhobo. It approached the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) and successfully secured the approvals, after resource verification. As part of the process, it recruited master's and first-degree holders for each of the languages. The choice of languages was based on membership of Radio Nigeria's National Network Languages (NNL) club and availability of enabling factors, such as having an existing staff member who was a native speaker of any of the languages. In the case of Tiv, consideration of the relative advantages of geography and history, as discussed above, came into play. The above reasons were sufficient to warrant the inclusion of the Tiv language in the list of new languages covered.

However, there were further incentives. This writer's prior personal exposure to the Tiv equipped him with vital information that tipped the balance. He had had relations and townsmen

living and thriving in Tiv land over the decades, including one who became a Judge in the High Court of Gboko, the late Justice Lawrence Anoliefo. He had become ensnared also by Tiv yams such as gbangu. So, he needed no help to argue the case for the inclusion of the Tiv language convincingly.

Getting students with JAMB credentials for the various languages became a big challenge, except for the Igbo language. We calculated that the lecturers and Graduate Assistants recruited for various languages would help us attract students, but that was a vain hope. Then, we received an application for Sabbatical placement from a staff member of Benue State University, Dr. Nelson Alyebo. Ordinarily, then, we were loath to accept lecturers from state universities for Sabbatical because of the payment problem posed by IPPIS. Nevertheless, we made him an offer: bring ten Tiv language candidates for NCE, and you will have a place immediately. He accepted the challenge, worked hard for two months and came up with the names. Although only seven reported eventually, we were more than willing to oblige him for the sake of seven! The rest, as often said, is history.

The members of this first batch of NCE (Tiv and other subject combinations) students have completed their final examinations and are set to formally graduate in the next convocation exercise. And they are writing their TRCN certification examination for both. That means, the first batch of Tiv language teachers produced outside the kingdom of the Tiv is ready to be pressed into service. It should be noted that of all our eight languages, only Tiv, with six students and Yoruba, with one, have NCE level students, apart from Igbo, which has numerous students.

The Graduate and NCE Conversion Programmes

Another of our NINLAN programmes that we figure out would be of immense benefit to the Tiv language is the Graduate Conversion Programme and the NCE -Conversion Programme. These are programmes by which degree holders and NCE holders who studied courses not related to language development, but who are fluent in their mother tongues, could be trained for two or three semesters to get the Post Graduate Diploma or Post NCE Diploma in the teaching of their languages.

This programme has already produced over one hundred and fifty teachers for Ibibio language. Following an official visit to Makurdi last year, during which we discussed this programme with the then Benue State Commissioner of Education, NINLAN developed a memorandum of understanding with the Benue State Government to produce teachers for Tiv language under this scheme, in collaboration with Benue State University. However, the MOU could not be signed before the exit of that Government. It has been represented to the present Government and is waiting for endorsement and commencement of the programme. In this and in so many other initiatives, Dr. Nelson Ayebo has indeed established himself as a warrior in the vanguard of Tiv language development.

Is a Tiv Language App Possible?

One other area in which NINLAN is poised to make a huge impact on Tiv language development is around harnessing technology to boost the language. Having launched the Omenka App for Igbo language development efforts, all the other languages represented at the Institute at any level at all were mobilised for similar efforts. The Tiv language group, led by Dr. Aor Terfa and Dr. Stephen Ajim, came up with the tentative name for the proposed Tiv language App, namely: 'Orfaneev-mbu-Liam', loosely translated as 'Man that knows the science of language or speech'.

NASALAN: The National Summit of All Languages of Nigeria

One final lever for the development of Tiv language under the auspices of NINLAN is the National Summit of All Languages of Nigeria (NASALAN) presently being incubated by the Institute. This is designed to be a gathering of the true representatives of every one of Nigeria's 512 living languages (SIL, Nigeria, 2023) to brainstorm, synergize, collaborate and jointly seize the initiative in developing their languages and in forcing the hands of Government at all levels to play their expected roles in the activation of the latent energy in our languages as media for mass literacy and home grown scientific and technological development of Nigeria.

The summit will enable the language groups to jointly assume ownership of the National Language Policy to ensure its improvement and implementation. It is a direct response to

the United Nations' Decade for Indigenous Languages, 2022 – 2032, which, if properly harnessed, will make Nigeria a multilingual giant in the world. The summit will be organised first at the zonal levels before a national one in Abuja. For effective implementation, the South has been placed in 5 zones and the North in 9 zones. Benue State, along with Nasarawa and Kogi States in Zone 3 of the North.

The Benue State Government will be expected to drive the participation of the language groups represented in the state and the implementation of the resolutions of the summit.

Conclusion

Making Tiv perform optimally is not merely a linguistic challenge; it is a cultural, educational, social and political imperative that requires commitment from the community, educators, and policymakers alike. By integrating Tiv more deeply into the educational systems, particularly of Benue State, by embracing digital innovations, involving the community, and securing government support, the Tiv language can flourish in both traditional and modern contexts. This journey will ensure that the language and the cultural heritage it represents remain a vibrant, integral part of the lives of the Tiv people for generations to come.

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