

STRATEGIES FOR REPOSITIONING ESAN LANGUAGE FOR EVERYDAY USAGE IN EDO CENTRAL SENATORIAL DISTRICT OF EDO STATE OF NIGERIA

OSIME, S.E.A., & IBHAFIDON, H.E. Ph.D

Department of Arts and Social Studies Education

Faculty of Education

Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma

Henry.ibhafidon@aauekpoma.edu.ng

Abstract

This paper examined the Esan language as an integral part of the Edoid group of languages, is spoken predominantly in Central Senatorial District of Edo State, Nigeria. The Esan language is a crucial marker of identity, culture, and history of the Esan people. However, in recent times, the language appeared to be seriously endangered due to a number of reasons among which are globalization, urbanization, and the dominance of English and Nigerian Pidgin in the Senatorial District. This paper interrogated the current status of Esan language, highlights the sociolinguistic challenges undermining its survival, and recommends strategies for repositioning the language within contemporary Nigerian society and global interplay. Drawing on theories of language maintenance and Fishman's model of reversing language shift, the paper argues for a multi-dimensional approach involving education, cultural mobilization, government policy, and evolving creative industries. The study concluded that revitalization of Esan language in the preservation of Nigeria's linguistic and cultural diversity is key.

Keywords: Esan Language, Language Endangered, Repositioning Strategies, Language Revitalization.

Introduction

Esan language is one of the major languages of the Edoic group of languages. It is an integral part of the koi language. The Esan language, often called Ishan by non-Esan people, is often regarded as a dialect of the Bini language. The language slightly differs from Bini language in both spelling and pronunciation. Otherwise, users of the two languages understand each other to a very large extent.

Language is more than a medium of communication. It is the repository of a people's worldview, philosophy, and collective memory (Bamgbose, 1991; UNESCO, 2003). For the Esan group of people who constitutes one of the major ethnic groups in Edo State, Esan language (*Ishan*) reflects centuries of oral traditions, folklore, proverbs, music, and communal values. Unfortunately, like many other minority languages in Nigeria, Esan has suffered a decline in usage, particularly among the younger generation (Osime, 2002).

The factors responsible for this decline are numerous. We need to state here that the official language of Nigeria is the English language. This language dominates education, governance and business; Nigerian Pidgin which has become the lingua franca of most urban centers and intergenerational language transmission within Esan families has weakened the use of

Esan Language. Unless urgent steps are taken, Esan may soon fall into the category of endangered languages with serious implications for cultural heritage and national diversity.

This paper therefore, examined strategies for repositioning Esan language, emphasizing education, technology, policy, community mobilization, and creative industries. It situates the discussion within global and Nigerian debates on language revitalization, drawing on lessons from other contexts.

Literature Review

Scholars have consistently emphasized the importance of indigenous languages for cultural identity and sustainable development (Adegbija, 2004; Egbokhare, 2004; Salawu, 2006). UNESCO (2003) observed that nearly half of the world's languages are at risk of extinction within the 21st century if deliberate revitalization measures are not implemented.

In Nigeria, the problem of **language shift** is well documented. Bamgbose (2011) noted that although over 500 languages are spoken in Nigeria, only a few enjoy strong vitality, while many are endangered. Adegbija (1994) described the sociolinguistic situation as one of “gradual erosion” where indigenous languages lose functional domains to English.

Specifically, studies on Esan language (Uhunmwangho & Omoregie, 2019; Okojie, 2020) have reported declining proficiency among young speakers, minimal representation in the school system, and poor presence in modern communication platforms. However, research also indicates that indigenous languages can be revived through deliberate interventions. Fishman's (1991) model of reversing language shift emphasizes the importance of intergenerational transmission, community activism, and institutional support.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopted Fishman's (1991) *Reversing Language Shift (RLS) theory*, which provides a systematic framework for revitalizing endangered languages. According to Fishman, the survival of a language depends primarily on its intergenerational transmission within families and communities. In addition, he admits that schools, media, and policy interventions also play crucial roles.

The framework is relevant to Esan because it emphasizes grassroots action combined with institutional support. By applying RLS, Esan Language can move from its current endangered status toward stabilization and eventual growth.

Five Basic Challenges Facing the Esan Language

The Esan Language is faced with a number of challenges. The challenges include decline in intergenerational transmission, educational marginalization, low media visibility, negative attitudes/language ideologies as well as globalization and urbanization. The challenges are listed and discussed below:

1. *Decline in Intergenerational Transmission:* Many Esan parents no longer speak the language to their children, preferring English or Nigerian Pidgin. This weakens the foundation of Esan language continuity. The Esan Language appears to be going into extinction. Children hardly speak the language. Most parents fail to hold discussion with their children in Esan. This situation, if not checked, could be detrimental to the existence of Esan Language.
2. *Educational Marginalization:* Esan is rarely taught beyond the lower primary school level. There is also a scarcity of standardized teaching materials, trained teachers, and

government support. Reference texts in Esan Language are hardly present. Till date, we do not have Esan Dictionary.

3. *Low Media Visibility*: Unlike Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo, Esan has limited presence in print media, broadcast, film, and digital platforms. This reduces its prestige and exposure.
4. *Negative Attitudes and Language Ideologies*: Some Esan speakers associate their language with “backwardness” and view English as a language of prestige and opportunity. For wrong orientation, some native speakers of Esan Language feel that speaking the language is a sign of anti-social. This is untrue. Studies have shown that proficiency in the first language of an individual will aid the learning of a second language such as the English Language.
5. *Globalization and Urbanization*: Urban migration leads to multilingual communities where Esan competes with dominant languages, making it less likely to be used.

Strategies for Repositioning Esan Language

The following strategies would be beneficial in the repositioning of Esan Language. The strategies include educational integration, curriculum development (teacher training programme and development of learning materials). Harnessing technology and digital media, government and institutional support, community mobilization and grassroot support as well as creativity in cultural affiliation

1. Educational Integration

- a. *Curriculum Development*: Esan should be included in school curricula from nursery to senior secondary levels in Edo State in the first instance. This will enable the language to have a strong foundation.
- b. *Teacher Training*: Colleges of Education and universities should establish departments and diploma programs dedicated to Esan studies. Governments across the board need to support this initiative through appropriate funding.
- c. *Learning Materials*: Production of textbooks, storybooks, dictionaries, and grammar books in Esan is key. This will help to boost the teaching/learning of Esan Language in schools.

2. Harnessing Technology and Digital Media

- a. *Development of Esan language-learning mobile apps and e-dictionaries* will go a long way in putting the Esan Language ahead.
- b. *Use of Social media*: *Esan Language should be promoted to be used in WhatsApp groups, TikTok videos, and YouTube contents.*
- c. *Creation of digital archives* of folktales, songs, oral histories, and proverbs for research and public use will help to put the language in the limelight through the creation of written records, videos, or audio recording of Esan Language.

3. *Government and Institutional Support*: Implementation of **language policies** mandating the teaching and promotion of Esan in Esanland schools. Governments across the board should, as a matter of urgency, support the teaching of Esan Language in schools, particularly in Central Senatorial District of Edo State. Such support could come in the form of grants for **research and documentation** of Esan. The use of Esan in **local government proceedings, signage, and public functions will go a long way to promoting the language**. In addition, government can help in the development of Esan Language policy and planning. This will go a long way to promoting Esan Language use in education, media, and government services.

4. Community Mobilization and Grassroots Efforts: Effective use of the Esan Language will help to promote the following:

- a. Establishment of *Esan cultural clubs* in primary, secondary and universities.
- b. Promotion of *intergenerational learning spaces* where elders teach children proverbs, riddles, and stories.
- c. Encouragement of parents to adopt *family language policies* that prioritize Esan in daily communication.
- d. Community mobilization of promoting the Esan Language will go a long way in developing language immersion programmes in schools. Again, a proper documentation of the language will be put in place. This situation will assist largely in providing training and support for local teachers to teach Esan Language and develop language curricula.

5. Creative and Popular Culture

Creation of popular cultural settings can be enacted through the following:

Support for *Nollywood movies* and music albums produced in Esan.

Organization of *cultural festivals* showcasing Esan poetry, drama, and storytelling.

Incentivizing writers and publishers to produce *novels, plays, and children's literature* in Esan.

The teaching of Esan Language can be used for preservation and revitalization through language documentation such as dictionaries, grammar, and language learning materials for effective study.

Prospects for Esan Language

If repositioning strategies are systematically implemented, Esan can experience revitalization. Language documentation and creative promotion would not only safeguard cultural heritage but also create new economic opportunities in tourism, entertainment, and education. Moreover, revitalizing Esan aligns with the *United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* on education and cultural preservation. It will foster pride among Esan youth, strengthen cultural identity, and contribute to Nigeria's linguistic diversity.

The introduction of Esan Language in education will play a significant role in preserving culture and promoting cultural identity. It will equally go a long way in improving learning outcomes through inclusive and equitable education as well as promote community engagement and development among the users of Esan Language.

Conclusion

The Esan language, though currently endangered, can be repositioned through deliberate strategies that combine family-level commitment, educational reforms, technological innovations, government support, and creative industries. Language is the soul of a people; to lose Esan would be to lose centuries of cultural memory. Repositioning it is therefore both a cultural imperative and a developmental necessity. The benefits of the including the Esan Language in education cannot be overemphasized. The inclusion is vital for preserving cultural heritage, promotion of inclusivity as well as fostering community engagement.

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