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LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT IN NIGERIA: FOCUS ON SMALL ETHNOLINGUISTIC COMMUNITIES IN NIGER STATE

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Abstract

This paper examines the level of endangerment of Ura, Lupa, Kaami, Bangi, Gelanci, and Asu languages spoken in Niger State, Nigeria. The scope covered includes frequency of their use in some vital domains like home, marketplaces, relaxation centres, among others. We have used the term 'very small' in this work to designate languages that are spoken by less than ten thousand (10,000) speakers. Edwards' (1992) model of analysis as modified by Grenoble and Whaley (1999) was used as our theoretical model. Our research instruments were questionnaire, interviews and observations. The study concludes that the major challenges of the 'very small' languages in Niger State are the size of their speakers and their restricted domains of use. The paper suggests that adequate provision for indigenous language use in pre-primary and primary school would go a long way in strengthening and revitalizing the languages.

Keywords

language endangerment, small languages, Nigeria, Niger state, language documentation

LENGUAS EN PELIGRO EN NIGERIA: FOCO EN COMUNIDADES ETNOLINGÜÍSTICAS PEQUEÑAS EN EL ESTADO DE NÍGER

Resumen

En este trabajo se examina el nivel de amenaza que experimentan las lenguas Ura, Lupa, Kaami, Bangi, Gelanci y Asu, habladas en el estado de Níger, en Nigeria. Se estudia la frecuencia de su uso en algunos ámbitos de la vida, como el hogar, los mercados o los centros de relajación, entre otros. Se ha

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utilizado el término “muy pequeño” para designar a los idiomas hablados por menos de diez mil hablantes. Se ha utilizado como modelo teórico el modelo de análisis de Edwards (1992), modificado por Grenoble y Whaley (1999). Los instrumentos de investigación han sido cuestionarios, entrevistas y observaciones. El estudio concluye que los principales retos de las lenguas “muy pequeñas” en el estado de Níger son el número de sus hablantes y sus dominios de uso restringidos. El texto sugiere que es necesario recorrer un largo camino de fortalecimiento y de revitalización de las lenguas indígenas para que puedan ser utilizadas en las escuelas de pre-primaria y de primaria.

Palabras clave
lenguas amenazadas, lenguas pequeñas, Nigeria, estado de Níger, documentación lingüística

1. Introduction

The factors that cause language endangerment vary from one ethnolinguistic community to the other. Population is however a common factor, though researches have shown that this factor cannot be used in isolation. Hence, this paper examines the role of population and domains of use in the classification of the ‘very small’ languages in Niger State, Nigeria.

This paper is divided into five sections. Section one is the introduction. Section two reviews the literature on language endangerment. In section three, we look at the theoretical model adopted for the study and adduce reasons for our choice. Section four is the presentation and discussion of population and domain as determinants for the classification of the ‘very small’ languages in Niger State of Nigeria. Section five concludes the study.

2. Language Endangerment

Language endangerment can be viewed as a situation whereby a language is under the threat of disuse, which could lead to death. According to Hale (1992), cited in Fakuade (1999: 59), an endangerment situation occurs when a language is being dominated by a more powerful language. This means that such a language tends to reduce in domain coverage because of the presence of a dominant and powerful language. In this instance, Hausa has posed serious threat to minority languages in the

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north, namely in Adamawa State (Fakuade 1999: 59). If this claim is anything to go by, then, the majority languages in the eastern and western parts of Nigeria, Igbo and Yorùbá respectively, have endangered the continued use of the minority languages in those areas.

The issue of language endangerment is so strife that Vital Signs (2006-2007), a publication of a United States-based research group, *Worldwatch*, cited in *The Punch,* (2006), reports that one language is lost every month. According to this report, the death of a language is most commonly caused by bans on regional languages, infectious diseases, wars, migration and cultural assimilation. Based on this report, a number of Nigerian languages, out of about 516 languages (Crystal 2000), would have been lost by the turn of the century. In other words, many speakers would have abandoned their languages for other languages. The process of language endangerment is captured in the following formula by Tandefelt (1992), quoted in Fakuade (1999: 61):

$$A > Ab > AB > aB > B$$

According to the formula, A represents the socially dominated minority language and language B represents the majority language, i.e. the dominating language, in a multilingual society. The intervening variables between A and B, according to this schema, refer to the process of second language learning, followed by a period of Bilingualism AB, then followed by almost total language shift, aB.

While reporting on the future of Nigerian languages, Ohiri-Aniche (2006) reports that marginalization of Nigerian languages in school(s) (especially in Nursery and Primary Schools) is a path to the loss and eventual extinction of the indigenous languages. Taking a sample of 36 schools in Lagos metropolis (Nigeria), she observes that 10 schools make use of an indigenous language as a teaching subject (Nursery 1-3), whereas English is taught in all the schools. According to her, only 4 schools use an indigenous language (Yorùbá) to teach their pupils. This report shows that even if the language is acquired at home (though this is often not the case), the child is forced to abandon it as it is not used for knowledge acquisition. According to Ishola (2009: 5):

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> The natural thing is to speak the mother tongue at home. When we were going to school, during the first three years in school, the language of instruction was the mother tongue. Even in the policy of education, it is stated there that the language of instruction in the first three years should be the mother tongue. Some people wrongly believe that speaking Yoruba when you are young will hamper your ability to speak English. No, a child can acquire as many as five different languages.

Various yardsticks have been proposed for determining endangerment situation, among which are: population, domination by a more powerful language and/or lack of adequate description of such a language (cf. Bamgbose 1976; Fakuade 1999). While the parameter that is based on use (Bamgbose 1976), is most favoured as a determinant of language endangerment, we observe that these variables work in varying ways for language vitality. Among such vital variables that will be examined here are: domains, population and use. However, the use of a language is an embedded factor in domains and population.

Domains of use of languages are thus among the factors that determine the status of languages. Domains refer to places where languages are used, among which are: home, school, offices, playground, and relaxation centers. For example, a language that is not used for business interaction and for other purposes in the vital domains earlier mentioned may be threatened. This is in addition to their not being used in such places as schools, offices, among others.

On the school domain, the practice in many schools negates the provisions of many education ordinances, policies and reforms introduced by successive governments in Nigeria and this has put many Nigerian languages on the endangerment list. For instance, Phelps Stokes' Commission to Africa (1920-21) cited in Crystal (2000: 83), notes that the practice of using European languages to teach African children is pedagogically wrong. According to the commission, it led to little learning and was psychologically and emotionally damaging to the children. It says that 'native tongue is immensely more vital in that it is one of the chief means of preserving what is good in native customs, ideas and ideals and thereby preserving what is more important than all these, namely, native self-respect'.

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3. Theoretical Model

The goal of this paper is to discuss the endangerment situation of some languages in Niger State. The paper examines the use of these languages in vital domains like the home, school and marketplaces, among others. It also considers population, another vital variable, for determining language endangerment.

In working out the factors that work for endangerment situation, Haugen (1972) and Haarmann (1986), among others have designed many approaches, especially those on the interaction between languages and the environments in which these languages are used. Their works have raised awareness on the alarming rate of language endangerment and provided means of determining an endangerment situation. However, their model does not attempt to identify the matrix of variables affecting threatened languages. For example, Haugen's (1972) approach is based on ten ecological questions which describe a given language situation:

(i) How is the language classified vis-à-vis other languages?
(ii) Who uses the language?
(iii) What are the domains of the language?
(iv) What other languages are used by its speakers?
(v) What are the language's internal varieties?
(vi) What are its written traditions?
(vii) What is the language's degree of standardization?
(viii) What institutional support does the language have?
(ix) What attitudes toward the language are held by its speakers?
(x) Where do all these factors place the language in relation to other languages?

The strength of Haugen's model is that it, according to Edwards (1992), provides an outline within which language contexts can be considered. His model also opens up a vital variable in the study of language vitality, i.e. ecological features. However, to posit general features rather than specific features is seen to be the major shortcoming of Haugen's model. His broad-based questions lead to loss of precision and possibly, therefore, to decreased generalisability (Edwards 1992: 43). It is also argued that Haugen's pairing of disciplinary sub-divisions with each question is faulty.

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For instance, it is observed that question (iii) (what are the domains of language use?) can easily apply to several other questions. Also, the introduction of ecological variable seems incomprehensive, as some important ecological variables like ethno-linguistic variables, ethno-psychological variables, among others, are not included.

Haarmann's (1986) contribution is an analysis of ecological variables. His work is popular for its methodical and systematic approach. Haarmann provides seven basic categories of ecological variables as follows (Haarmann 1986: 74):

(i) Ethno-demographic variables (including size and concentration of the language group, urban-rural distinctions, etc.).

(ii) Ethno-sociological variables (sex, age, social stratification, degree of endogamy-exogamy, etc.).

(iii) Ethno-political variables (group-state relations, institutional status of language, etc.).

(iv) Ethno-cultural variables (descent criteria, organizational promotion of group interests, characteristics of the written language, etc.).

(v) Ethno-psychological variables (attitudes towards other ethnic groups, the language-identity relationship, etc.).

(vi) Interactional variables (communicational ability, language variety use by topic and situation, etc.).

(vii) Ethno-linguistic variables (linguistic distance between contact languages).

Despite some notable improvement by Haarmann (1986) on the earlier models, his model still has some shortcomings. For instance, some of the variables are too general. For example, group-state relations and institutional status of languages need further breakdown. Also, considerable overlaps are found among the variables. The model also leaves out historical and geographical components, which are vital to language situation.

Sociological and socio-psychological variables also play important roles in determining ethno-linguistic vitality, especially where two or more languages are in contact. These variables include: demographic, economic, political and cultural factors.

In view of lack of specific approach towards typologizing endangered languages, a model that encompasses the entire variables which can interact to sap the vitality of a language or bolster it, is required. Edwards (1992) comes up with a more elaborate

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model that accounts for conditions under which people maintain or give up their language. Though this model builds on the previous efforts, its discovery and inclusion of more vital variables explain why it is upheld by sociolinguists as a veritable tool in analyzing language endangerment situation. While our work is based on Edward's model, we incorporate the modification made by Grenoble & Whaley (1999) on the theory.

4. Edwards' Model

Edwards' model uses a number of variables which are relevant to minority language situations. He classifies his model into two: 'Categorization A', which consists of different perspectives and which allows us to characterize human groups according to geography, psychology, religion, politics, history, education, economics, linguistics, sociology, technology and demography. The second is 'Categorization B'. This identifies the scope over which the A-variables can be applied: speaker, language and setting. With these two parameters, Edwards generates a table with thirty-three cells. A set of specific questions is then associated with each of the cells in the table. The result gives a good overview of the features relevant to assessing language vitality. This is particularly useful as it provides a compelling prognosis for the continued use of a given language. Edwards' (1992) framework is based on a number of variables from which questions are generated. Table 1 shows Edwards' model:

Categorization A	**Categorization B**		
	Speaker	*Language*	*Setting*
Demography	1	2	3
Sociology	4	5	6
Linguistics	7	8	9
Psychology	10	11	12
History	13	14	15
Politics	16	17	18
Geography	19	20	21
Education	22	23	24
Religion	25	26	27
Economics	28	29	30
Technology	31	32	33

Table 1. Edwards' (1992) Model of Language Endangerment

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Following Table 1, a set of two parameters is generated (Categorizations A and B). Categorization A consists of different perspectives by which human groups can be identified while categorization B identifies the scope over which the A-variables can be applied: Speaker, Language, and Setting. These two parameters generate a table with thirty-three cells (i.e. Table 1). A set of questions is associated with each of the cells in the table (cf. Edwards 1992). The strength of Edwards' model is its distinction between micro-variables and macro-variables. The micro-variables are the features of an individual speech community (the speaker and language columns) while the macro-variables are the features of the broader context (setting). A comprehensive typology can be carried out if the internal factors (as opposed to the external ones) responsible for the endangerment of the threatened languages are identified (Grenoble & Whaley 1999: 89).

Macro-variables are useful as broad indicators of the possible threat to minority languages in a given region. Threatened 'minority' languages may not follow the same pattern of loss because of different circumstances of individual languages. For instance, languages do exhibit structural differences. Also, the length of contact with majority languages may differ. Buttressing this scenario, Grenoble & Whaley (1999: 27), while reporting the language situation in the United States, state that language loss is easy to detect among the native communities despite the fact that there are prominent differences at the level of micro-variables. This is foregrounding the interplay of micro-variables and macro-variables. In other words, the latter is a function of the former. Macro-variables are features which are shared across large numbers of endangerment situations, whereas micro-variables are unique features of specific speech communities. It is at the level of micro-variables that one can account for differences in the rate, outcomes and reversibility of endangered languages.

The second strength of Edward's model is the distinction he makes between the speaker column and language column. This distinction shows that a shared language is not a guarantee for shared identity. Grenoble & Whaley (1999: 90) cite the Twa of Rwanda who speak Kinya-rwanda with the Hutu and Tutsi who are major ethnic groups in Rwanda. However, the Twa retain their cultural identity. In Nigeria, it is observed that a detachment of Hausa people found outside their home still retain the Hausa language as well as Hausa cultural practices. The reason for this is obvious: language loyalty.

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Edward's model is the widely accepted model for typologizing minority languages because of its explicit and comprehensive approach. This model is useful for a better understanding of language endangerment. Despite this, the model has some shortcomings. One of them is the non-inclusion of literacy as a variable for determining endangerment situation. The argument of Grenoble & Whaley (1999: 93) is based on the inclusion of literacy variable as well as hierarchisation of these variables. Above all, a model that includes literacy for determining minority language vitality will enable us to know the variables affecting the languages under investigation. For instance, researchers have observed that even the languages we refer to as majority languages are somewhat endangered (cf. Fabunmi & Salawu 2005). So, the model is not an account of the loss *per se*, but the processes of loss of languages (majority or minority). The model is also simply a description of the community's norms or attitudes which can be altered or added if we discover more information.

Another reason we are talking about literacy is that it provides a contemporary window through which language could be viewed. For instance, it may be useful to ask: Has the language been reduced to writing? How many people can read and write in their language? All these would enable us to know what corrective measure can be taken to address the level of endangerment.

5. Methodology

This study focuses on the endangerment of Ura, Lupa, Kaami, Baangi, Gelanci and Asu languages in Niger State, Nigeria. Having carried out a preliminary study of the language situation in the study area, we designed a questionnaire with which basic data were collected. The questionnaire used is modeled after Fakuade's (1995). For validity and suitability, the questionnaire was pre-tested to determine its effectiveness and also to correct errors that might occur. Because of the observations in the pre-test, certain changes were effected. For instance, it was discovered that respondents were reluctant to supply personal information like age, name and family details. This was anticipated because Fakuade (1995: 48) reports the same challenge with the Kuteb-Jukum speakers of Taraba State.

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Though personal information is equally important, the crucial thing centered on the linguistic bias of the informants. After the pre-test, the entire questionnaire was administered. The distribution covered all main categories: the young and the old (between the ages of 12-20, 21-30, 31-49, and 50 and above respectively), the educated and uneducated, and the male and the female. The questionnaire was administered in English. The illiterates were guided using Pidgin English or interpreters as the case may be. Our task was made less cumbersome by the kind assistance of field and research assistants.

Six languages fall under the 'very small' languages in Niger State. They are: Ura, Lupa, Kaami, Bangi, Gelanci and Asu. Nine hundred copies of the questionnaire were prepared with an average of one hundred and fifty (150) per language. The questionnaire was divided into three parts: Section A focuses on the language use of the informants in different domains; section B focuses on the language attitude of the respondents, while section C is designed to collect information on informants' personal details. Basic statistical principles were employed and a simple percentage formula is used to arrive at our findings.

The study also makes use of oral interview method. This is done with a view to having unbiased report on the language use and the attitude of the people to their languages. The researcher uses both structured and unstructured interviews with the aid of bilingual speakers. By this, we prepared questions for our respondents and also asked spontaneous questions.

Key persons and opinion leaders from different subdivisions were interviewed about the use of their languages. Questions asked covered different domains of use of their languages. For example, the respondents were asked to answer such questions as: 'How many languages do you speak?' 'What language do you speak at home?' 'Is your language used to teach in school?' 'What language do you use to communicate with friends outside the home?' 'What language do you speak in the market?' 'Is your language used on the radio?' The questions have been structured to cover certain specific areas.

Given the fear usually anticipated by speakers of languages when approached by researchers, the investigator sought and received assistance of Mallam Abdullahi Bala Mashegu, a Director of Personnel Management in Paikoro Local Government Area of Niger State, to serve as our research guide. We relied on his knowledge of the study

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area. He assisted in restoring the confidence of the native people in the work. However, the investigator did not rule out resistance from native people since attitudes towards outsiders vary from community to community. The researcher did not exclude what Fakuade (1995: 52) calls 'exchange technique'. This, according to him, 'is a technique that requires an investigator to reward his informants if he wants to have their attention for a long time'.

We have also made use of observation as a vital instrument in this study. In particular, we used participant observation. The participant observation enabled us to record natural data on the language use of the speakers. By this, we watched and observed language use in market places, canteens, drinking bars, suya spots and other places of public interest. The method enabled us to assess language behaviour and language attitude of the people in the areas under study. However, we used observation to complement and validate information obtained through questionnaire and interview.

6. Presentation and Analysis of Data

Demographic information**:** Very small language group. The languages that constitute this group are: Ura, Lupa, Kaami, Bangi Gelanci and Asu. The speakers in this language group range between 1,501 and 9,100 with Asu language having the smallest population size. The population of the languages is given in Table 2.

Language	*Population*
Ura	9,100
Lupa	8,588
Kaami	5,000
Baangi	4,000
Gelanci	1,761
Asu	1,501

Table 2. Population distribution of the languages. Source: National Population Commission, 2006.

The speakers of these languages are spread across towns and villages in the local government areas of the State. Mainly, they are found in Borgu, Munta, Rafi, Mariga

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and Rijau Local Government Areas. The breakdown of the distribution of questionnaire according to age is given in Table 3 below:

Age	*Number*	*Percentage*
12-20	259	28.78
21-30	214	23.78
31-49	237	26.3
50 and above	190	21.1
Total	900	100

Table 3. Age distribution of respondents.

7. Discussion

Out of 451 adult respondents, only 59, representing 13%, say they use their native languages with the elderly and occasionally with relations. The youth (28 of them) recorded 6% of the native language use. The level of endangerment is very high in the domains examined as the language of wider communication, an LWC, (Hausa) has taken over vital domains like home, playgrounds, drinking bars, among others. Tables 4 and 5 show parents' and children's self-reports of language choice at home.

Context and situation	**Ura**	**Lupa**	**Kaami**	**Gelanci**	**Bangi**	**Asu**
When speaking with spouse	18	16	14.9	16	13	10
With neighbours	19	14	14	11	13	9.2
With children	12	9.1	9	7.7	12	9
With relations	15	8	6.9	5	4.2	3.8
Average Total	16	11.78	11.2	9.93	10.55	8

Table 4. Parents' self-reports on language use (%)

Total No of respondents: 642

Total No of respondents per language: 107

Language of wider communication (LWC): Hausa

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Context and situation	**Ura**	**Lupa**	**Kaami**	**Gelanci**	**Bangi**	**Asu**
When speaking with your parents	7.7	8	6	6	4.4	5
With your grandparents	7	8	6.6	5.5	4	3
With brothers and sisters	4.8	6	7	5	4.1	3.7
With brothers and sisters	3	4	5	3	3.2	2.9
Average Total	5.63	6.5	6.15	4.89	3.93	3.65

Table 5. Children's self-reports on language use (%)
Total No of respondents: 258
Total No of respondents per language: 43
Language of wider communication (LWC): Hausa

Language choice in the home is not any different from other domains. Table 6 gives the percentage of indigenous language choice in market, relaxation centres and playground.

Indigenous Language	*LWC*	*Market*	*Relaxation centres*	*Playground*
Ura	Hausa	9	6.7	8
Lupa	Hausa	8	7	6
Kaami	Hausa	8.5	7	5.3
Bangi	Hausa	5	3	2
Gelanci	Hausa	7	4	4
Asu	Hausa	3	2	2
Average Total		6.75	5.11	4.55

Table 6. Indigenous language use in domains other than the home.

The average percentages of language use in market, drinking bar and playground are: 6.75, 4.95 and 4.55 respectively. So, comparing code choice in Tables 4a and 4b and 5 shows that language choice has merged leaving no significant difference. For instance, the cumulative percentage of the native language choice in Table 4a and 4b is 8.30% (home), while it is 5.42% in Table 5 (i.e. other domains). The interpretation of this is that though all domains are shrinking code choice is worse in market, drinking bar and playground. The implication of this is that Ura, Lupa, Kaami, Gelanci, Bangi and

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Asu are endangered to the extent that they may soon go into extinction if urgent and drastic measures are not put in place.

No language is an island to itself. This explains why languages, in the face of modern challenges, borrow from inventing and rich-in-literature languages. However, large-scale lexical borrowing could spell doom for the host language. This means that when languages are in contact, there could be negative and positive influences. Large scale borrowing, negative attitude of speakers, government misplaced priority on language policy, unaccommodationist education policy, as well as economic dependency; have fostered language endangerment not only in Niger State but in Nigeria as a whole.

In the case of Ura, Lupa, Kaami, Bangi, Gelanci and Asu, the positive attitude is no more than verbal. In other words, there is a verbal commitment of the speakers to their languages though in actual sense, this does not reflect in their language use. They are proud to speak their languages to their kinsmen. The speakers of these languages identify with their languages as well as their cultural practices. The factor that works against them is number. For example, Ura has the highest population of 9,100, while Asu has the lowest of 1,501 speakers, who are spread across towns and villages where 'large languages' are spoken. Population thus becomes the greatest challenge to the spread and use of these languages, which in the long run restricts their domains of use. And the population continues to shrink. For instance, Blench (1991) puts the speakers of Asu at 5,000. The population has reduced to 1,501 in 2006 (cf. National Population Report, 2006). The recurring question is: 'who do you speak your language to?' If the answer is: 'To a fellow native speaker. Then the limitation is obvious, as there are a limited number of speakers for these languages.

An interesting dimension to endangerment situation in the areas identified is that while one would expect the speakers of endangered languages to embrace the major languages like Nupe, Gwari, Kamuku, Bisan, Kambari, which are major languages where these languages are spoken, they opt for Hausa. This implies that the supposedly very large and large languages in the areas are also under threat from Hausa language.

The scenario depicted in the analysis of the 'very small' languages in Niger State shows that the languages are endangered. In the four domains examined, home has the highest percentage of 8.30, market recorded 6.75, and drinking bar recorded 5.11

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while playground recorded 4.55. We did not record in any school where any of the languages is used to teach. This makes the curve a sloppy one as shown in Figure 1:

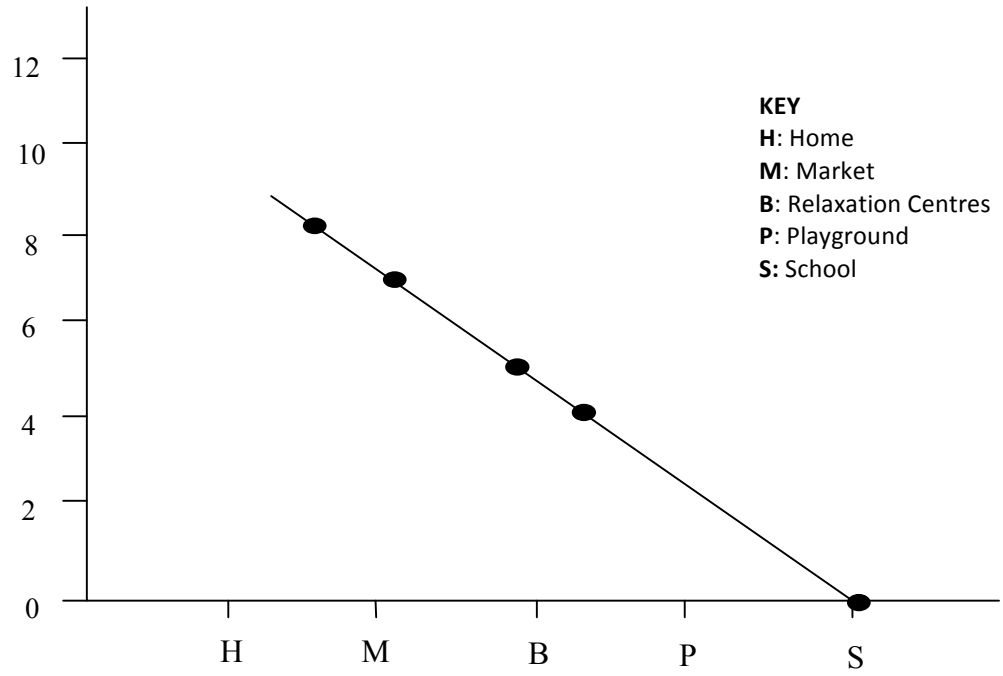


Figure 1. A graph showing the percentage of language use by the 'very small language' group speakers

8. Conclusion

This paper has discussed population and domain as vital variables in determining an endangerment situation. We observed that if a language is stifled as a result of reduction in domains, such a language may be endangered which could result to loss and finally death. We have also established the fact that population works in varying ways for endangered languages. In other words, the telling effects of reduced population of speakers of languages differ. That is, a language that has a thin population of speakers is likely to be more endangered than a language with a relatively high population of speakers. We also discovered that the 'very small' language group in Niger State, Nigeria, thrives in the home more or less as shown in the data. This shows that home is the last exit point of a dying language.

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With facts emanating from this study, if speakers do not clamour for linguistic empowerment, and government does not formulate a proactive language policy, it is only a matter of time for these languages to disappear. The first step towards this is to encourage the use of indigenous languages in pre-primary and primary schools, especially in villages and towns where speakers are densely concentrated. This will impact more on the attitude and prestige of the speakers.

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