

# LEVERAGING LANGUAGE-BASED ECONOMY TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF NIGERIA

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## Abstract

*For decades, Nigeria has operated an oil-based economy. However, today, given the poor ranking of Nigeria in the Human Development Index globally, it is crucial to look for alternative income resources. This paper, therefore, is a philosophical inquiry into the prospect of using Nigerian indigenous languages as economic capital. Particularly, it conceptualised their economy-related ontological status, examined their economic potential, and identified the ethical implications of their commodification. Guided by Pierre Bourdieu's linguistic capital theory and conceptual analysis, it argues that they are economic capital, and, ipso facto, pivotal for a language-based economy towards Nigerian sustainable development. As a qualitative study, it drew the data for analysis mainly from related extant literature. The findings showed that though Nigerian indigenous languages are both communicative tools and valuable resources, convertible into economic capital, there is a need to guard against language commodification. Thus, it concludes that attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria, among other things, requires a development template that is fundamentally, though not exclusively, Nigerian indigenous languages-driven, one that promotes responsible linguistic autonomy and jettisons undue linguistic dependence, respects language and cultural diversities, and rejects linguistic injustice and exclusion. Hence, this paper recommends the need to balance Nigerian language policy to give Nigerian languages their proper place at all levels of Nigerian life.*

**Keywords:** *Economic Capital, Ethics, Indigenous Language, Ontological, Sustainable Development*

## Introduction

Nigeria is a multicultural and multilingual nation, with over two hundred languages (Hoffman, 1975). Significant among these languages are Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba. While these dominant indigenous languages and other minority languages are used for daily local engagements and economic transactions, the English language subsists as the official language of educational instruction and government engagements. Unfortunately, the above development has led to marginalisation of Nigeria's indigenous languages practically and normatively, as it circumvents some language groups from full participation in the socio-political life of the country. Hence, this paper argues that Nigerian indigenous languages are economic capital, and, thus, should constitute a fulcrum for a language-based economy towards Nigerian sustainable development. The above frame of thought rests on Bourdieu's (1986, 1991) linguistic capital theory, which conceives language as an asset or symbolic capital rather than a mere communicative tool.

*Ipsa facto*, language is exchangeable for capital. The thesis also leverages the ontological foundation of language of Heidegger (1962), Wittgenstein (2009), Gadamer (2004), etc.

Nonetheless, the above thesis raises some philosophical concerns, especially of an ethical nature, focusing on the commodification of language, linguistic justice, and inclusion. Interestingly, some philosophical works have equally responded to it, as evident in the works of Sandel (2012), Fricker (2007), Taylor (1994) and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (2006). Admittedly, too, some empirical studies have responded to the above, though sociologically, as is obvious in the works of Bamgbose (2000), Adegbija (2004), Emenanjo (2005, 1985), Udoh (2025), Dom-Anyanwu (2022), Ogara & Anidi (2024), etc. Nonetheless, one area that has remained underexplored is the philosophical inquiry into the prospects of using Nigerian indigenous languages as economic capital. Therefore, this paper sets out to address the above concerns, anchoring on Bourdieu's linguistic capital theory as a theoretical framework and conceptual analysis as a conceptual tool.

### **Literature review**

This paper reviewed the literature under the following themes: language, functions of language, economic capital, ethical issues related to economic capital, and empirical studies.

#### **Language**

Language is a crucial element of culture, and could be a tongue or a faculty for speech. As a tongue, language is a mode of communication specific to a particular culture. Then, as a faculty, it stands for humans' natural capacity for speech, which is general for all cultures (Mondin, 1991). Hence, Nnaemedo (2023a) described it as a critical element of culture, providing an aperture to understanding and projecting every culture. Therefore, language is a very important feature of humans, substantially differentiating them from other animals. However, this present study considered language as a tongue, as well as a faculty for speech.

#### **Functions of language**

Philosophical debate on the function of language revolves around its intrinsic and extrinsic roles. The former deals with the communicative, expressive, descriptive, and ontological features of language, while the latter concerns its instrumental role (Mondin, 1991). Thus, the intrinsic function shows that language helps man to interact, express his feelings and describe the state of affairs. Further, it shows that language performs some functions in the order of being, that is, an ontological function (Mondin, 1991).

The ontological function of language is evident in Heidegger (1962), who conceived language as the house of being, through which being discloses itself. Gadamer (2004) reinforced Heidegger's view by portraying how the above disclosure leads to the fusion of horizons and shared meaning. Wittgenstein (2009) followed suit, as it presented reality as socially constructed. Contrastingly, Bourdieu (1986) critiqued the ontological stand by maintaining that language is a symbolic capital rather than merely a communicative tool. Bourdieu aligned with Foucault (1972) and Habermas (1975), who discussed the relationship between power, legitimacy and domination. Nonetheless, this paper is not

merely concerned with ontological and symbolic capital views on language. Rather, it focused on how the two notions play out in Nigerian indigenous languages towards Nigerian economic development.

### **Economic capital**

The term capital generally means a resource or asset used to achieve a given end. In medieval and early modern times, capital represented money investable or invested in business (Hodgson, 2014). However, Smith (2022) considered it to include physical assets, machines and people. Thus, in economic parlance, capital stands for an organisation's total monetary and asset investments, implying fixed and working (circulating) capital. In a philosophical context, capital acquires a deeper meaning. Such is glaring in the work of Bourdieu (1986), which defines it as "accumulated labour... which, when appropriated on a private... enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour" (p.241). Here, social energy refers to the mental and emotional vigour and dynamism an individual requires for meaningful and fulfilled social interaction and engagements. Ipso facto, capital is critical in shaping social dynamism. Bourdieu identified four forms of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. He underpinned that economic capital, embodying money and substantial assets, represents resources that are immediately and directly convertible into money and possibly institutionalised in the form of property rights. Cultural capital embodies all capabilities, based on resources, knowledge, and culture, while social capital comprises family relationships, social interaction and networks. Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that economic capital is at the root of other capitals, given that each is convertible into it and institutionalised under certain conditions. Therefore, in this paper, capital embodies tangible and intangible resources that are convertible into money. However, the question unanswered by the literature above concerns how precisely Nigerian indigenous languages constitute economic capital towards Nigeria's economic development, which is one of the issues this paper aims to address.

### **Ethical issues related to economic capital**

It is also crucial to review some works on the ethical implications of using language as economic capital. One of such works is Sandel (2012), who underscored the success of markets at generating affluence, and cautioned on the need to keep markets in their place. Meadowcroft (2013), however, argued that Sandel's concern is not new, but only represents an old argument in a contemporary context. Nonetheless, Taylor (1994) and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (2006) were critics of all forms of marginalisation, especially of Africa by the West. Likewise, Fricker (2007) critiqued what she called epistemic injustice. Nnaemedo (2020a) and Okonkwo (2012) called for equal validity of all languages as a way out of the labyrinth. However, it is noteworthy that none of the works above focused on the ethical implications of using Nigerian indigenous languages as economic capital, signalling a knowledge gap yearning for scholarly attention, which is what this paper tends to achieve.

### **Empirical studies**

It is crucial to note that some empirical studies have been carried out on the relevance of indigenous languages to national development. These works address the issue of language

exclusion (Bamgbose, 2000; Adegbija, 2004) and the need to implement Nigerian education policy (Emenanjo, 2005, 1985). Others stress indigenous languages as tools for skill learning (Dom-Anyanwu, 2022) and instruments of sustainable development (Udoh, 2025; Ogara & Anidi, 2024). Nevertheless, it is important to note that these works were basically sociological studies. By implication, similar works but of a philosophical nature are required to balance the sociological studies. Thus, this paper sets out to fill this knowledge gap.

### **Nigerian indigenous languages as economic capital**

This section focuses on the ontological, economic and ethical dimensions of utilising indigenous languages as economic capital. The first requirement for a good discussion on the usage of language as economic capital is to establish the ontological status of indigenous languages.

#### **Ontological dimension**

As a branch of general metaphysics, ontology is the study of being as being, a general inquiry into the properties, primary divisions and characteristics of being (Nnaemedo, 2023b; Iroegbu, 1995). Reasoning from the ontological domain, language is more than a communicative tool. It is, in Heidegger's (1962) terms, a house of being, and so what makes being intelligible. So, apart from being a communicative tool, language fundamentally constitutes a crucial aspect of culture, and subsists as a carrier of people's collective memory and channel of their culture and worldview, as well as the means of preserving them. Hence, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (2006) argues that "language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history" (p.15). Thus, as a repository or storehouse of people's knowledge, linguistic and cultural heritage, the indigenous language is a valuable social resource, pointing to its intrinsic value. Subsequently, its character as a valuable social asset confers it with a symbolic capital status, which makes it convertible into economic capital. Bourdieu (1986) defined symbolic capital as capital, in whatever form – insofar as it is represented, 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). Symbolic capital is rooted in other capitals. It depicts people's symbolic placements of themselves. Though symbolic capital derives from other forms of capital, these other forms of capital, too, derive their legitimacy through symbolic capital, given that it is symbolic capital that portrays and defines their worth or value for societal acceptance.

Language, on the other hand, is the means through which this legitimacy is expressed, understood, and implemented, a means of applicative cognition. Hence, language legitimises social capital, and social capital results in symbolic capital and conferment of symbolic power, which subsequently creates hierarchies among people. For instance, it is language that defines a person who is prestigious, honourable, and just. Through this definition, these persons so defined assume symbolic power, which creates societal hierarchies that subsequently position them to determine other states of affairs. A typical instance is the acquisition of academic status. It is a language that states who has attained it

and who has not. In this way, language not only confers legitimacy to the possessors of the academic status, but it also bestows them with symbolic power to control, by placing them as authority in the area of their academic competence. Consequently, their position on issues relating to knowledge in the area under discussion is considered superior vis-à-vis others without such status, as defined by language. The position above supports Foucault (1972) and Habermas' (1975) social construction theory, who, in discussing the relationship between power, legitimacy and domination, portrayed how dominant powers determine what is legitimate and otherwise. Additionally, it supports Wittgenstein (2009), who presented reality as socially constructed.

Conceptualising indigenous languages in Nigeria as economic capital becomes very glaring when aligned with the arguments above, as their usage in academia confers symbolic capital on their beneficiaries. For instance, teaching and learning in an indigenous language make for enhanced and easy understanding, leading to rapid and solid academic development, which manifests in the acquisition of basic reputation or evidence of academic accomplishment, corroborating Dom-Anyanwu (2022), who conceived indigenous languages as tools for skill learning in Nigeria. This reputation or academic laurels subsequently give room for employment, enabling beneficiaries to contribute to national development, thereby promoting sustainable development in Nigeria. As well, undertaking academic instruction using indigenous languages makes for proficiency in speaking. Such provides job opportunities as employers of labour often prefer such employees to boost the image of their organisation, especially in the area of public relations. The above arguments align with Gadamer, who showed how shared understanding results in the fusion of horizons and shared meaning (2004). It implies that as indigenous languages create room for such collaborative thinking, the result is translated into symbolic capital and subsequently to economic capital, given that it leads to greater cooperation and optimum contribution towards the common good.

Besides, indigenous language embodies and shapes people's thinking patterns and philosophy, which govern their economic life. These rational models determine their value system. They regulate what they consider reputable and worthy of recognition. This value system, being a symbolic capital, is also convertible into economic capital. The argument above supports Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (2006), who called for decolonisation, insisting on the need for Africa to bring back its economy, politics, cultures, languages and patriotic writers. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's invitation is not a call that is tantamount to a nostalgia for traditionalism, but rather a return to authenticity, a launchpad which gives meaning and originality to all African struggles. The argument also supports Taylor (1994), who argued that identities are formed in open dialogue and shaped by a predefined social script. Hence, he called for equal recognition of all nations, considering withholding such recognition as a form of oppression. Development based on equal recognition enhances the being rather than the having of the beneficiaries (John Paul II, 1987; Marcel, 1949). It is integral, as it capitalises on people's capabilities and does not undermine them (Nnaemedo, 2020b; Sen, 1999).

### **Economic potential of indigenous languages**

Already, indigenous languages have served as a valuable social resource in diverse fields of life. Nonetheless, this paper argues that leveraging the indigenous languages-based economy still presents more economic opportunities in those fields. These economic potentials are evident in the use of indigenous languages in daily local business transactions, advertising new products, human capital development, digital media, and the entertainment industries. In daily business transactions, understanding is crucial. Such is the case, as understanding, according to Gadamer, leads to the fusion of horizons and shared meaning, thereby affecting a state of affairs positively (2004). Hence, understanding helps to build trust and partnership between people. Interestingly, in local business transactions, indigenous languages play a great role in facilitating buying and selling in a language understandable to the transacting parties, thereby promoting business transactions and economic development of the nation. However, in a situation where there is a breach in communication resulting from a language barrier, an interpreter versatile in both the indigenous language and English is employed to mediate, given the person's linguistic competence, which here translates to symbolic capital. The service of such an interpreter is often paid for, which is clear evidence of the convertibility of symbolic capital into economic capital and a validation of Bourdieu (1986), who conceived language as a form of symbolic capital. It implies that utilising indigenous languages as the official language of government interactions would attract more economic capital, as it would involve interpreting and translating for people from other nationalities.

Indigenous languages also have economic potential for advertising industries, given that their utilisation in advertising is not merely in communicative capacity but also as a valuable social capital. In this context, their usage to relay information about the latest brand of market product in a language understandable to the end users fundamentally serves economic ends as they constitute social capital convertible to economic capital. So, it is logical to argue that indigenous languages portend economic potential for advertising, as their usage in advertising has translated into economic capital in the form of improved organisational performance. Thus, as indigenous languages help to present the products in a way that evokes the end users' emotion, invariably, they subsist as dynamic social resources, convertible to economic capital, which manifests in enhanced appreciation and patronage of an organisation's products. Greater patronage would be realised where indigenous languages are the official languages of interaction at all levels of Nigerian life. The probability of such attainment rests on the fact that the patronage will now involve young people who, according to O'Neill (2013), are the predominant social media users.

Indigenous languages also have economic potential for human capital development (HCD), as they ensure the imparting of training in a language that the trainees understand easily. Most often, the problem with the current system of education in Nigeria is that teaching and learning are mediated through languages unfamiliar to teachers and students. Resultantly, this leaves the teachers struggling to achieve effective teaching, and students with the challenges of easy comprehension. Conversely, where teaching and learning are through indigenous languages, there is a high probability of teachers teaching with proficiency and competence, as they employ rudiments of the language that would help

drive their message home. The outcome of their teaching is also the formation of competent students, as effective teaching would probably lead to effective learning. These proficiencies and competencies subsequently confer symbolic capital on students and teachers. Likewise, this symbolic capital is convertible into economic capital as they make them employable and deployable into paid services. The argument above verifies Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (2006), who critiqued the stealing of African treasures of the mind to enrich European languages and cultures. It also shows that Africa has so many treasures embedded in its languages. These treasures are profound social resources, translatable into economic capital, evident in how effective communication and other social engagements bring about positive economic results. For instance, through this social resource, there is a high likelihood of attaining effective teaching and learning, as evident in the success of the apprenticeship system in Nigeria, especially among the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria. Here, the teaching and learning process is through indigenous languages, making for easy comprehension.

Another area where the economic potential of an indigenous language is apparent is in the digital media industries, as it manifests clear evidence that social resources are convertible into economic capital. Such becomes glaring when one reflects that today, the world is not only a global village but the "world in my palm" (Nnaemedo, 2020c, 2024). With the emergence of digital media, communication has transformed. Information is not only generated through traditional media but also through social media, given their user-generated content capabilities. Significantly, these digital media features allow users to generate content in indigenous languages, which, of course, furnishes them with rich repositories, such as proverbs, folk tales, etc. Subsequently, this content subsists as social resources that translate into economic capital. Hence, some social media users today make their living by engaging in content creation. Certainly, more revenue would accrue from using indigenous languages as official languages in Nigeria, as some young people who now denigrate indigenous languages would massively engage in social media using their indigenous languages.

Indigenous languages also have economic potential for entertainment industries by serving as a valuable social resource for content creation. This social resource is evident in the rich cultural repositories archived in indigenous languages and translatable into economic capital. For instance, this translation process can occur when a movie industry, relying on local content offered by indigenous languages, creates content that inspires patronage, which is convertible into economic capital. In the above example, though what observers perceive is customers' satisfaction manifested in their patronage of the movie industry, what truly transpires at the economic level is a conversion of social capital into economic capital. It is therefore crucial to indicate that using indigenous languages as the official languages in Nigeria would elicit more patronage, as such a policy would evolve indigenous language-literate movie directors and users, especially young people.

### **Ethical implications**

Leveraging on indigenous languages as economic capital has some ethical implications: commodification of language, linguistic imperialism and marginalisation, epistemic or

linguistic injustice, and exclusion. The issue of language commodification occurs when one stresses the instrumental aspect of language to the detriment of its intrinsic value. In contrast, some thinkers have emphasised the intrinsic dimension of language (Chomsky, 1965). It implies that language utilisation in the context of economic capital should respect the boundary between the intrinsic and extrinsic values of language to avoid attendant ethical implications, such as linguistic domination.

Being that language is measured in terms of economic potential, there is a tendency to impose language over a people, as happened during the colonial era, and which persists today, especially in Africa. This linguistic imposition, far from encouraging national growth, inhibits it, as it shields the linguistically oppressed from thinking in a manner that they know best. So, with the repositories of their thinking pattern gone or suppressed, they are forced to migrate to a system of thinking, most often, inconsistent and discordant with the reality around them. In this consideration, there is disharmony between them and the reality around them, as each speaks in a different language, reminiscent of the Babel experience (Genesis 6). The need to guide against the linguistic imposition of any form informed Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (2006) critique against using language as an instrument of spiritual subjugation. Besides, such backs Wiredu's (1995) call for conceptual decolonisation. Such is necessary to situate Nigeria in a developmental vantage position, as language is a carrier of culture and other developmental matrices of any nation, and shapes thinking, echoing Wittgenstein's (2009) stance that the limit of people's language is the limit of their world.

One of the fallouts of linguistic imposition is linguistic marginalisation. In a bid to derive the economic advantages or capital embedded in a language, some people have so subtly suppressed other languages that these languages are now maintaining a marginal existence. As marginalised languages, they play second fiddle in a domain where they should subsist as the principal language, as obtains in Nigeria, where the English language is the *lingua franca* and the official language for government engagements and academic institutions, especially from senior secondary school to university level.

Marginalisation of a language is an ethical issue as it robs a language group of its linguistic rights, thereby promoting epistemic injustices and exclusion. Hence, Fricker (2007) called for linguistic justice to address the epistemic injustice. It requires, among others, recognising the equal validity of all languages (Nnaemedo, 2020a; Okonkwo, 2012). The equal validity of all languages ensures equal treatment of all languages, as there is no inferior language. Yes, a language may differ in functionality given its level of usage globally, but that does not foreclose its possession of similar potentiality for similar functionality given the opportunity.

## Conclusion

This paper critically examined the prospects of utilising indigenous languages as economic capital towards sustainable development in Nigeria. It argued that Nigerian indigenous

languages are communicative tools and valuable social capital convertible into economic capital for sustainable development when used in all dimensions of Nigeria's life, domestic and official. It justified the above thesis ontologically, economically, and ethically. In the ontological domain, this paper argued that, following Heidegger's notion of language as house being, it is language that makes being intelligible. As such, indigenous languages, as they embody people's worldviews, cultures, and norms, provide materials for interpreting and understanding reality, which subsequently makes sustainable development feasible.

At the economic pedestal, indigenous languages are symbolic capital engendering symbolic power responsible for hierarchies in society, which also represents, to a great extent, economic hierarchies. This symbolic capital is convertible into economic capital. However, at the ethical domain, this paper warned against the commodification of language, with its attendant linguistic injustice and exclusion. Rather, it maintained that authentic development should respect people's linguistic rights and linguistic diversity.

Therefore, this paper concludes that attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria requires a development template that is fundamentally, though not exclusively, driven by Nigerian indigenous languages. This development model should ensure responsible linguistic autonomy, respect language and cultural diversities, jettison any form of undue linguistic dependence, and reject injustice and exclusion.

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