

The role of ethnically mixed marriages in language shift: a case study of Nigeria's minority languages

Herbert Igboanusi & Hans-Georg Wolf

University of Ibadan – Nigeria
University of Hong Kong – Hong Kong

As the foundation of homes, the marriage institution is an important agent of socialization. In this regard, marriage can be relied upon as a leading player in language and cultural maintenance. However, mixed marriages may be a contributory factor to language shift in the home because it can lead to a change in language use patterns among minority language speakers and their children. This means that the likelihood of preserving a minority language is greater in marriages among individuals who speak the same indigenous language than in situations in which spouses speak different languages. This study uses questionnaire data from parents of ethnically mixed marriages to explain how mixed marriages contribute to language shift from minority languages to English (Nigeria's official language), Nigerian Pidgin (informal lingua franca) and the major languages (i.e. Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) in the home domains. The study shows that the future of minority languages will depend largely on the roles of families and the value attached to minority ethnic identity by young people, particularly those from mixed homes.