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Bridging generations: Language transmission and cultural identity among Nigerian immigrants in Pretoria North, South Africa

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This study investigates the complex relationship among language, culture, and identity among Nigerian immigrants in Pretoria North, South Africa, with a specific focus on mother tongue preservation and transmission. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research explored participants' perceptions of their mother tongue's role in cultural heritage, the challenges of maintaining the use of the mother tongue within an immigrant context, and the factors influencing intergenerational language transmission. Findings reveal a diverse picture in which participants expressed varied affective connections to their mother tongue, often viewing the mother tongue as a cornerstone of their cultural identity. However, the practical realities of life in a foreign country, including the dominance of English, often led to a divergence between ideals and actual language practices. This study underscores the significance of understanding the factors that influence language choice and use within immigrant communities to develop effective strategies for preserving cultural heritage through language transmission.

Contribution: By drawing attention to the complexities of language maintenance in this specific context, the research contributes to broader discussions on multilingualism, identity, and cultural preservation in immigrant populations.

Keywords: mother tongue; cultural identity; linguistic precarity; intergenerational transmission; language shift; ethnolinguistic vitality.

Introduction

The transmission of cultural heritage through language is a vital concern for immigrant communities globally (Yadegari 2021). Language, a cornerstone of culture, plays a crucial role in shaping identity, perceptions, and community cohesion (Bilgory-Fazakas & Armon-Lotem 2025). This study focuses on Nigerian immigrants in Pretoria North, South Africa, and examines their attitudes towards preserving their cultural identity by passing on their mother tongue to their children. Globalisation and migration exert significant pressure on indigenous languages, often leading to language shift and loss (Crystal & Crystal 2000). For immigrant populations, maintaining their linguistic and cultural heritage while adapting to a new sociocultural environment presents unique challenges.

Prior research has underscored the importance of mother tongue proficiency for cognitive development, cultural identity formation, and the intergenerational transmission of values (e.g. Nishanthi 2020). While research into Nigerian immigrant language practices in South Africa is an emerging field, existing literature has largely focused on different provincial contexts. For instance, Umana (2023) explores the language practices and vitality of Nigerian immigrants in Cape Town, highlighting the role of community networks in the Western Cape. However, there remains a significant scholarly gap regarding the Gauteng province, specifically the Pretoria North enclave. This geographic distinction is critical because, unlike the Western Cape, Gauteng serves as the primary economic and migratory hub, housing 44.9% of the country's international migrants (StatsSA 2022). The unique socio-legal pressures and the specific 'legal precarity' found in the Pretoria North context present a different set of linguistic challenges than those found in Cape Town, necessitating a localised investigation into how these specific urban pressures accelerate language shift.

This study aimed to address this gap by exploring the factors influencing Nigerian immigrants' attitudes towards mother tongue use and its implications for cultural identity transmission. By investigating the intricate relationships among language, culture, and migration in this context,

this research seeks to provide insights into the strategies employed by immigrant families to maintain their linguistic and cultural heritage in a foreign land.

To understand the specific experiences of Nigerian immigrants in Pretoria North regarding language transmission and cultural identity preservation, we need to first consider the broader context of immigration to South Africa and the characteristics of the Nigerian diaspora within the country.

Immigration trends in South Africa and the Nigerian diaspora

South Africa's immigration patterns have changed significantly since the end of apartheid in 1994, with more open laws leading to an increase in arrivals from various nations, including Nigeria (Crush & Dodson 2007). While the country hosts a substantial and diverse immigrant population, with the 2022 Census reporting over 2.4 million foreign-born individuals, this study focuses specifically on the Nigerian immigrant community. Estimates of the Nigerian population in South Africa vary widely. In 2011, the figure was around 24 000 (Adesina 2019), but by 2023, that number had reportedly grown significantly, with some estimates exceeding 500 000 (Adediran 2023). The migration of Nigerians to South Africa increased notably from 2004, with monthly entries rising from 2000 to 4000 by 2010. During this period, approximately 36 000 Nigerian nationals entered the country (Adediran 2023).

These migrants are a diverse group, including entrepreneurs, skilled workers, students, and families. Geographically, Nigerian immigrants tend to reside in economic hubs like Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, and the Western Cape provinces (Adediran 2023). The 2022 Census reveals that 44.9% of all international migrants in South Africa reside in the Gauteng province, which is why Pretoria North is a key settlement area for this demographic. Motivations for this migration include seeking opportunities and escaping challenging conditions in Nigeria. Many initially enter on tourist visas and subsequently overstay (Adediran 2023). While some Nigerians have sought asylum, their numbers are small compared to those for the broader context of asylum applications in South Africa. For example, in 2023, there were over 180 000 pending asylum applications in the country, with only a fraction of these being from Nigerian nationals. The majority of these applications are rejected (Big-Alabo 2019). The high rate of asylum application rejections and visa infractions (Adediran 2023) creates a state of 'legal precarity'. This instability often incentivises rapid linguistic assimilation into English or local South African languages as a survival strategy, as maintaining a distinct Nigerian linguistic identity may further marginalise individuals who are already in a vulnerable socio-political position.

Furthermore, in the context of this study, 'mother tongue' is disambiguated from 'official language' (English) or '*lingua franca*' (Nigerian Pidgin). It refers specifically to the indigenous first languages (L1) – such as Yoruba, Igbo, or Edo – that function as the primary vessels for ethnic heritage and ancestral traditions. South Africa itself boasts a rich linguistic diversity, with 12 official languages: Afrikaans, English, Ndebele, Northern Sotho, Sotho, Swati, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa, Zulu, and South African Sign Language. This multilingual environment forms the backdrop against which Nigerian immigrants must navigate their daily interactions, adding another layer of complexity to their efforts to maintain their own languages and cultural identities.

Literature review

The complex relationship among language, culture, and identity has been a subject of extensive scholarly inquiry. Language, as a fundamental tool for human interaction, is inextricably linked to cultural transmission and identity formation (Rabiah 2018). As Wunseh (2018) posits, language reflects societal worldviews and cultural values, shaping individuals' perceptions of themselves and others. The preservation of cultural heritage through language transmission is a critical concern, particularly in the context of globalisation and migration. Mills et al. (eds. 2017) emphasise the role of national languages in fostering unity and identity. This study delves into the dynamics of language, culture, and identity within the Nigerian immigrant community in Pretoria North, aiming to contribute to the broader understanding of this complex interplay.

The symbiotic relationship between indigenous languages and cultural preservation

Language and culture are inextricably linked, forming the foundation of human society (Kasper & Omori 2010; Kim 2020; Kramsch 2014). Language is not merely a tool for communication but also a repository of cultural knowledge, values, and beliefs. As Whorfian linguistic relativity posits, language shapes our perception of the world, influencing thought and behaviour (Fabb 2016). Conversely, culture provides the context within which language evolves and is used.

The transmission of culture across generations is heavily reliant on language (Little 2020). Oral traditions, folklore, and customs are preserved and shared through linguistic practices. As Atobatele and Mouboua (2024) argue, language acts as a symbol of cultural identity, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity. However, in the South African context, this symbol is under active threat. The 'threat' to Nigerian cultural heritage is evidenced by the rapid shift towards English among the second generation, among whom the pragmatic necessity of navigating South Africa's socio-economic landscape overrides the affective desire for heritage preservation (Umana 2023).

This study argues that without intentional transmission strategies, the linguistic distinctiveness of the Nigerian diaspora in Pretoria North faces eventual erosion within two generations. This localised shift is symptomatic of a broader

global crisis; the globalisation of communication and the pervasive dominance of English as a *lingua franca* continue to pose existential challenges to linguistic diversity and the preservation of heritage (Grigoryeva & Zakirova 2022). As seen in the Pretoria North context, such transitions towards dominant global languages often precipitate a systemic loss of mother tongue proficiency, ultimately resulting in the gradual erosion of cultural identity (Crystal & Crystal 2000).

Navigating identity and the impact of migration on cultural self-perception

Identity, a multifaceted construct, is shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, social, and personal factors (Balogun & Obosi 2018). For individuals, it is a sense of self, a connection to a particular group or community. Migration, as a transformative experience, profoundly impacts an individual's sense of identity (Alzayed 2015).

In the Pretoria North context, this identity construction is a linguistic process, the mother tongue serving as the primary 'symbolic anchor' to the homeland, while the adoption of the host language represents a pragmatic shift in social identity. Consequently, the negotiation between the mother tongue and the host language becomes the central axis upon which migrant identity is constructed and maintained (Bhandari 2021). Acculturation, as defined by Berry (2017), is the process of adapting to a new culture while maintaining elements of one's original culture. This process can lead to various identity outcomes, including integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalisation (Berry 2017). Language plays a pivotal role in identity formation and maintenance. For migrants, the mother tongue often serves as a symbolic link to their homeland and cultural heritage. However, the pressure to acquire the host language can lead to language shift and potential erosion of cultural identity (Atobatele & Mouboua 2024).

The negotiation between the mother tongue and the host language becomes a central aspect of identity construction for migrants. Furthermore, migration can lead to the development of hybrid identities, in which individuals incorporate elements of both original and host cultures (Wagner 2016). This process of identity hybridisation is influenced by factors such as age, gender, and social networks. For Nigerian immigrants in Pretoria North, the interplay among identity, migration, and language is particularly complex. Navigating a new cultural and linguistic environment while maintaining connections to their homeland presents significant challenges. Understanding the experiences of these individuals requires a nuanced exploration of the factors shaping their identities and their strategies for coping with the complexities of migration and adjusting to a new environment.

Linguistic imperialism and attitudes towards mother tongue maintenance

Language attitudes, encompassing beliefs, values, and stereotypes about languages and their speakers, significantly influence language use and maintenance (Coronel-Molina 2014). For immigrant communities, language attitudes play a crucial role in shaping their linguistic practices and cultural identity (Lou & Noels 2020). The global dominance of English has had profound implications for language diversity. As Phillipson (2009) argues, English has emerged as a language of power, leading to the marginalisation of other languages.

This linguistic imperialism has accelerated language shift and loss in many communities (Crystal & Crystal 2000). However, there is a growing awareness of the importance of linguistic diversity and cultural heritage, leading to efforts to revitalise endangered languages and promote multilingualism (Nettle & Romaine 2000). For Nigerian immigrants in Pretoria North, language attitudes towards both the mother tongue and English are likely to be complex and multifaceted. Factors such as age, education, and length of residence in South Africa may influence the language preferences of individuals and their perceptions of the value of their mother tongue. Additionally, the social and economic context in which immigrants find themselves, including access to education and employment opportunities, can shape their language attitudes and practices.

Understanding the language attitudes of Nigerian immigrants is essential for developing effective strategies to support mother tongue maintenance and cultural preservation. By examining the factors influencing language choice and use, researchers can gain insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by these communities.

Theoretical framework: Acculturation and ethnolinguistic vitality in migrant contexts

A robust theoretical framework is essential for guiding research and interpreting findings. This study draws on key theories from sociolinguistics, anthropology, and psychology to examine the interplay among language, culture, and identity among Nigerian immigrants in Pretoria North.

Acculturation theory

Acculturation theory provides a foundational framework for understanding the process of cultural adaptation among immigrants. Berry's (2017) model posits four acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalisation. By applying this framework, we can explore how Nigerian immigrants navigate the complexities of maintaining their cultural heritage while adapting to South African society. In this context, Berry's (2017) model is used to determine whether the 'legal precarity' and economic pressures of the Gauteng marketplace force a pragmatic shift from a desired state of 'Integration' towards a functional 'Assimilation' into English.

Ethnolinguistic vitality theory

Ethnolinguistic vitality theory offers a lens for examining the factors influencing language maintenance and shift within immigrant communities (Clément & Norton 2021). By

assessing the demographic, socio-economic, institutional, and intergenerational factors affecting the vitality of the Nigerian languages in Pretoria North, we can gain insights into the challenges faced by language preservation efforts. While the objective vitality of Nigerian languages in Pretoria North is structurally low because of a lack of institutional status, this study specifically utilises the 'Subjective Vitality' parameter of the theory (Giles & Johnson 1987). This distinction is 'fit for purpose' because it measures the community's internal perception of their language's prestige and future prospects. It is this subjective belief in the language's value – contrasted against the low objective institutional support – that allows us to empirically investigate the 'Paradox of Vitality' identified in the findings.

Ethnolinguistic identity theory

Giles and Johnson's ethnolinguistic identity theory is essential for understanding how individuals construct and negotiate their identities through language use (Harwood 2020). To ensure a robust sociocultural linguistic approach, this study specifically integrates Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) framework of identity relations. By focusing on 'Tactics of Intersubjectivity', specifically adequation (seeking similarity) and distinction (maintaining difference), we can explore how Nigerian immigrants employ linguistic strategies to affirm their cultural heritage while simultaneously navigating the dominant South African linguistic environment.

Scope and research objectives

This investigation focuses on three critical areas: firstly, the alignment between perceived cultural value and actual linguistic practice; secondly, the specific domestic and social contexts that facilitate or hinder mother tongue use; and finally, the underlying socio-economic drivers, such as length of residency and social networks, which dictate language shift in the Pretoria North enclave.

Research methods and design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to explore the attitudes and practices of Nigerian immigrants in Pretoria North. In this design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and analysed independently. The findings were then merged during the interpretation phase to identify convergences, divergences, or 'silences' in the data, providing a multidimensional view of language shift. This approach was particularly necessary given the multidimensional nature of language shift; while quantitative data identify the frequency of language loss, qualitative insights are required to uncover the underlying affective motivations and psychological barriers to transmission.

Research design

Pretoria North as a case study for linguistic communities

A case study approach was employed to provide an in-depth exploration of the attitudes and practices of Nigerian immigrants in Pretoria North. This design is 'fit for purpose' because it uses this specific community as a vehicle to understand the broader sociolinguistic phenomenon of diaspora language maintenance. A case study allows for the investigation of a bounded system, typically of a social nature, such as a community or group (Lawrence 2014; Stake & Visse 1995). Pretoria North serves as a critical case because it functions as a high-density linguistic enclave. Choosing a bounded case study over a broad survey allows for the isolation of localised socio-economic variables, such as proximity to specific English-medium schools and local labour market demands, which directly influence the 'pragmatic necessity' of language shift. This methodological approach acknowledges the complexity of the research topic and seeks to address the limitations inherent in using a single research method. While the integration of quantitative and qualitative data presents analytical challenges, it allowed for a more comprehensive and informative picture of the research phenomenon to emerge.

Population

The target population for this study comprises Nigerian immigrants in Pretoria North, a diverse suburban area in Pretoria, South Africa. This specific geographic location was chosen to focus on a well-defined immigrant community, allowing for an in-depth exploration of language attitudes and practices within a bounded context. The Nigerian immigrant population in Pretoria North is characterised by its heterogeneity, encompassing individuals from various ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. This diversity provides an opportunity to examine the intricate nature of language preservation across different segments of the community. Focusing on this diverse population is methodologically intentional and allows the study to determine whether variables such as ethnic background (e.g. Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa) or socio-economic status act as buffers against, or catalysts for, the dominance of English in the diaspora. By selecting a diverse sample of Nigerian immigrants, the study aims to capture the breadth of experiences and perspectives within this population.

Sampling strategy

Sampling, the process of selecting a subset of a population for study, is crucial in research design. This study employed a combination of convenience and snowball sampling to recruit participants. For the qualitative phase, convenience sampling was utilised as a result of the practical challenges of accessing the target population. Participants were recruited based on their availability and accessibility, leveraging the researcher's existing networks within the Nigerian immigrant community in Pretoria North. While this method offers advantages in terms of time and cost-efficiency, it also carries the risk of selection bias. To mitigate this risk, we made efforts to ensure participant diversity in terms of gender, age, and linguistic background. In the quantitative phase, snowball sampling was employed to expand the sample size and reach a wider range of

participants. Initial participants were identified through convenience sampling, and they subsequently referred other eligible individuals to participate in the study. This method proved effective in accessing a larger pool of participants within the Nigerian immigrant community. However, it is important to acknowledge the potential for bias because of the reliance on social networks. Despite the potential for bias, these non-probability methods were methodologically essential because of the 'hard-to-reach' nature of the immigrant cohort. Given the climate of legal precarity and the sensitivity surrounding residency status, traditional random sampling was unfeasible. Snowball sampling, therefore, served as a trust-building mechanism, ensuring higher response rates and more honest disclosure regarding sensitive cultural practices. Table 1 provides a demographic overview of the larger quantitative sample, while Table 2 details the characteristics of the smaller qualitative group.

By combining convenience and snowball sampling, the study aimed to achieve a balance between practical considerations and the need for a diverse and illustrative sample.

Data collection

Data collection involved a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon.

Survey questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was administered to collect quantitative data on participants' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours related to language preservation and cultural identity. Likert scale items were used to measure respondents' level of agreement or disagreement with statements pertaining to language use, cultural practices, and identity maintenance. The questionnaire was designed to be efficient and user-friendly, allowing for rapid data collection.

Semi-structured interviews

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in English, lasting between 45 min and 60 min. All sessions were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim for analysis. This format allowed for open-ended discussions, enabling participants to elaborate on the 'Paradox of Vitality' identified in their daily practices.

TABLE 1: Gender, age range, and languages included among the mother tongues of the Nigerian immigrants sampled to respond to the questionnaire.

Sex	Participant identifier	Age range (years)	Mother tongues represented
Male	59	30–55	Yoruba, Ibo, Edo, Benin, Ebira, Kogi, Efik, Ibibio, Bayelsa, Ijaw, Nupe
Female	41	29–51	Yoruba, Ibo, Edo, Benin, Ebira, Kogi, Efik, Bayelsa, Ijaw, Nupe

TABLE 2: Gender, age range, and languages included among the mother tongues of the Nigerian immigrants interviewed.

Sex	Participant identifier	Age range (years)	Mother tongues represented
Female	3	32–40	Yoruba, Ibo, Efik
Male	4	30–45	Yoruba, Ibo, Ebira, Benin

By combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, the study aimed to triangulate findings and provide a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon.

Data analysis

Quantitative data analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were subjected to statistical analysis by using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarise participant demographics and provide an overview of the data. Frequency distributions, percentages, and measures of central tendency were calculated to describe participants' attitudes and behaviours related to language preservation. Cross-tabulations and correlation analysis were conducted to explore relationships between variables and identify potential patterns in the data.

Qualitative data analysis

Qualitative data were analysed by using the six-phase thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involved an iterative process of familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, and searching for broader themes. These themes were then rigorously reviewed, defined, and named, such as 'Legal Precarity', before the final report was produced to ensure a coherent and theoretically grounded narrative of the findings.

By combining quantitative and qualitative data analysis, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the research phenomenon. The integration of these methods enabled triangulation of findings, enhancing the credibility and validity of the research.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by the Tshwane University of Technology Faculty Ethics Committee. The ethical clearance number is FCRE/APL/STD/2022/14. Beyond institutional compliance, the study prioritised participant anonymity and informed consent, particularly given the legal precarity associated with migrant status in the region.

Results

Language attitudes and intergenerational transmission

Quantitative analysis: Statistical trends in mother tongue proficiency and usage

The quantitative analysis provides insights into Nigerian immigrants' attitudes towards their mother tongue and its role in preserving cultural identity in Pretoria North, based on the primary data collected from the 100 participants surveyed for this study. Data from the research instrument indicate that a substantial majority (68.7%) of the sampled participants reported speaking and understanding their mother tongue, highlighting its significance in maintaining cultural heritage. However, while 56.6% expressed high

levels of proficiency, 17.2% did not speak or understand their mother tongue at all, indicating varying levels of language maintenance within this specific cohort. As reflected in the survey responses, most participants (52.5%) viewed their mother tongue as crucial for cultural transmission, underscoring its role as a cultural asset. Furthermore, 55.5% of the respondents agreed that teaching their children the mother tongue preserves cultural identity, emphasising intergenerational language transmission. While participants recognised the mother tongue's importance, opinions on its influence on attitudes varied. The results show that 45.4% believed it influenced their attitudes positively, 37.3% supported it to some extent. Conversely, 17.2% saw no influence, suggesting diverse perspectives on the impact of language within the local Nigerian diaspora.

The social environment emerged as a significant factor influencing language use, with 47.5% of surveyed participants acknowledging its impact. This analysis highlights the complex interconnection between individual attitudes and societal pressures encountered in the Pretoria North context. Challenges in intergenerational language transmission were evident in the collected data. Approximately 46.4% of participants reported that they rarely or never communicated with their children in their mother tongue, suggesting a potential language shift. Moreover, the dominance of English, or another South African language, in family communication recorded in this study suggests external language influences. Overall, the quantitative findings reveal a complex relationship among language, culture, and identity among Nigerian immigrants in Pretoria North. While strong attachments to the mother tongue exist among the sampled population, challenges within the family and broader society in maintaining it are apparent from the findings of this research.

Qualitative synthesis: Subjective experiences of cultural and linguistic identity

Language as a vehicle for cultural transmission: Participants expressed a strong belief in the mother tongue as a vital conduit for preserving cultural identity. Language was viewed not merely as a communication tool but also as a repository of cultural values, traditions, and history. As one participant stated:

> 'It is important to me that my child speak my mother tongue because my mother tongue signifies my identity wherever I find myself on the surface of the earth'(Participant B, 36 years old, Female)

This sentiment underscores the deep-rooted connection between language and identity among Nigerian immigrants. The practice of cultural display, such as wearing traditional attire or preparing cultural foods, was often linked to language use. These practices reinforced the notion of the mother tongue as a visible symbol of cultural heritage. As one participant noted:

> 'I always want to showcase my culture … I make sure she goes to school in her native dress.' (Participant B, 36 years old, Female)

This attitude suggests a holistic approach to cultural preservation, with language serving as a central component. However, the study also revealed a multifaceted understanding of the challenges involved in intergenerational language transmission. While many participants expressed a desire to pass on their mother tongue, they also acknowledged the pressures of acculturation and the dominance of English in the broader society. This tension between cultural preservation and adaptation to the host environment is a complex issue that requires further exploration.

Diverse attitudes towards mother tongue: Participants exhibited a range of attitudes towards their mother tongue, reflecting the complex interplay of individual experiences, cultural values, and social pressures. While many expressed a strong sense of pride and belonging associated with their mother tongue, others demonstrated a more ambivalent stance.

Some participants emphasised the importance of maintaining a balance between the mother tongue and English, recognising the need to adapt to the linguistic demands of the host society. This pragmatic approach suggests a strategic use of both languages to navigate different social contexts. However, others expressed a preference for English, citing factors such as globalisation and the perceived advantages of English proficiency.

It is important to note that these attitudes were not static but influenced by a variety of factors, including age, length of residence, and level of acculturation. Further research is needed to explore these variables in greater depth.

Language use in the family context: The extent to which Nigerian immigrants in Pretoria North used their mother tongue with their children varied significantly. While some participants reported using the mother tongue as the primary language of communication within the home, others primarily used English or a mixture of both languages. Factors such as the age of children, the language proficiency of parents, and the broader linguistic environment influenced language choice.

The use of the mother tongue often extended beyond verbal communication, with participants incorporating it into songs, stories, and cultural practices. These strategies aimed to foster a sense of cultural identity and connection among family members. However, the challenges of maintaining the mother tongue in a predominantly English-speaking environment were evident, as many participants reported increasing use of English in their daily lives.

Overall, the qualitative findings highlight the complex and dynamic nature of language maintenance and cultural identity among Nigerian immigrants in Pretoria North. While there is a strong desire to preserve the mother tongue as a symbol of heritage, the pressures of acculturation and the dominance of English pose significant challenges.

Understanding the factors that influence language choice and transmission is crucial for developing effective strategies to support language maintenance within immigrant communities.

Thematic analysis of quantitative and qualitative data

This section integrates the quantitative and qualitative findings to address the research questions, providing a comprehensive understanding of Nigerian immigrants' attitudes and practices towards mother tongue preservation in Pretoria North.

Perceptions of the mother tongue as a cultural asset

The quantitative data revealed a strong association between the mother tongue and cultural identity, with a majority of participants viewing it as crucial for cultural transmission. This finding is corroborated by the qualitative data, which highlighted the symbolic importance of the mother tongue as a carrier of cultural values and traditions. Participants expressed a deep-rooted connection to their language as a means of preserving their heritage and passing it on to future generations. However, the quantitative data also indicated challenges in intergenerational language transmission, with a significant proportion of participants reporting limited or no use of the mother tongue with their children. This finding aligns with the qualitative data, which revealed the complex interplay between the desire to preserve cultural heritage and the pressures of acculturation.

Domestic language practices and contexts of use

The quantitative data demonstrated a clear preference for English or other South African languages in family communication, with a significant proportion of participants reporting limited or no use of the mother tongue with their children. These findings are supported by the qualitative data, which revealed the challenges of maintaining the mother tongue in a predominantly English-speaking environment. While some participants expressed a desire to use their mother tongue with their children, the practical realities of daily life often necessitated the use of English. However, the qualitative data also highlighted the importance of creating opportunities for mother tongue use, such as through songs, stories, and cultural practices, suggesting that even limited exposure to the language can contribute to cultural transmission.

Socio-environmental determinants of language shift

The quantitative results identified the broader social environment as a primary factor influencing linguistic practice, with participants acknowledging its significant impact on their daily choices. This finding is further enriched by the qualitative data, which revealed the complex interplay between individual attitudes, societal pressures, and broader linguistic contexts. Participants described the challenges of balancing cultural preservation with the demands of integration into the host society. Factors such as age, length of residence, and social networks emerged as important determinants of language attitudes and practices.

Furthermore, the qualitative data highlighted the role of language ideologies in shaping language use. Participants expressed varying perspectives on the value and utility of the mother tongue, with some emphasising its importance for cultural identity and others prioritising English for practical reasons. These diverse attitudes reflect the complex and dynamic nature of language maintenance among immigrant communities.

This research contributes new knowledge by identifying 'legal precarity' and 'urban social integration' as primary drivers of language shift among Nigerians in Pretoria North. Unlike previous studies that focus on purely cognitive or affective reasons for language loss, these data suggest that for the Pretoria North diaspora, English is not just a lingua franca but also a 'shield' used to navigate a socio-politically sensitive host environment.

Discussion

The conflict between cultural ideals and pragmatic assimilation

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the complex relationship among language, culture, and identity among Nigerian immigrants in Pretoria North. Our integrated approach reveals a nuanced picture, in which individual commitment to cultural heritage is often at odds with the powerful socio-economic pressures and linguistic challenges of the host society.

Acculturation pressures and the pragmatic dominance of English

The quantitative data established a strong foundation for cultural transmission, with a notable proportion of participants reporting proficiency in their mother tongue. However, this finding is contrasted by the disparity between language knowledge and actual usage within the family. The concerning trend of a significant number of participants not communicating with their children in their mother tongue points to a potential erosion of language and cultural heritage over time.

This tension between the desire to maintain one's roots and the need to adapt is consistent with Berry's (2017) concept of integration, in which immigrants seek to retain their cultural identity while also engaging with the host culture. This divergence between attitude and action is further contextualised by our qualitative findings. Participants expressed a deep-rooted, affective connection to their mother tongue, viewing it as a repository of cultural values and identity. However, they also acknowledged the pragmatic realities of life in South Africa.

The dominance of English in education and public life creates a practical need to equip children with the linguistic skills

necessary for academic and professional success (Nyamekye, Uwen & Anani 2025). This pressure often leads to a language choice that prioritises English, undermining efforts at intergenerational mother tongue transmission. The pressures of acculturation, therefore, pose a significant challenge to the ethnolinguistic vitality of Nigerian languages in this community, as posited by Clément and Norton (2021).

Applying Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) framework, we see parents employing a tactic of adequacy by prioritising English to ensure that their children 'fit' the South African socio-economic landscape. Simultaneously, they maintain distinction through symbolic cultural displays. This dual strategy confirms that identity is not a static state but a relational product of interaction within the Pretoria North marketplace.

Legal precarity as a catalyst for language shift

The linguistic challenges faced by this cohort are exacerbated by their broader social and legal standing. As previously noted, the high rate of asylum application rejections and visa infractions (Adediran 2023) creates a state of 'legal precarity' (Sedacca 2024). This instability often incentivises rapid linguistic assimilation into English or local South African languages as a survival strategy. Maintaining a distinct Nigerian linguistic identity may further marginalise individuals in a host environment in which they lack permanent legal standing.

Consequently, the shift towards English is not merely a loss of interest in heritage but also a calculated response to the hostile linguistic marketplace in which L1 maintenance offers fewer protections than English proficiency. The quantitative frequency of language shift (46.4%) finds its 'voice' in the qualitative narratives, in which participants described the 'pragmatic sacrifice' of their mother tongue. This finding confirms that the statistical erosion is not a result of apathy but a calculated response to the legal precarity (Adediran 2023; Sedacca 2024) of their migration context.

Synthesising the paradox of ethnolinguistic vitality

Ultimately, this study identifies a 'Paradox of Vitality', while the community exhibits a fierce affective attachment to their heritage (identity), the specific linguistic challenges of the Pretoria North enclave render this pride insufficient for intergenerational transmission (culture). While strong attitudes and the use of strategies like cultural displays show a resilience and determination to preserve heritage, they are often insufficient to counter systemic forces such as the lack of supportive language policies and educational programmes (Afolalu 2026; Bilgory-Fazakas & Armon-Lotem 2025).

This paradox is best understood through the lens of 'Subjective Vitality' (Abrams, Barker & Giles 2009). While the objective institutional vitality of Nigerian languages in Pretoria is low, the high subjective vitality – the internal pride and perceived status reported by participants – creates a psychological buffer. However, as the 46.4% non-transmission rate suggests, subjective pride cannot override the lack of objective institutional support.

Scholarly implications towards proactive strategies for heritage safeguarding

The findings of this study underscore that language maintenance is not solely an individual choice but also a complex negotiation shaped by both personal beliefs and the broader societal context. As evidenced by the 46.4% of participants who reported a cessation of intergenerational transmission, even high levels of individual resilience are often insufficient to counter systemic forces, such as the absence of institutionalised language policies or tailored educational programs for migrant families (Inan & Harris 2025).

To build on this research, future studies should move beyond descriptive analysis to explore the 'Paradox of Vitality' identified in this cohort. Longitudinal studies are crucial to track changes in linguistic fluency, language choice with children, and self-reported identity shifts over time within this community. Additionally, research focused on the efficacy of specific bilingual education models, such as community-based Saturday schools for Nigerian languages or digital media-based home programs, could provide practical solutions to aid language recovery and the safeguarding of cultural traditions. Ultimately, fostering a more inclusive and culturally supportive environment for Nigerian immigrants requires proactive, multi-level interventions that engage with institutional policies and community-based programs.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that language transmission among Nigerian immigrants in Pretoria North is a dynamic process shaped by a fundamental tension between idealistic goals of cultural preservation and the pragmatic realities of life in a new country. While a majority of participants expressed a strong desire to preserve their mother tongue, the disparity between attitude and action was a central theme. This study identifies a 'Paradox of Vitality', while the community exhibits a fierce affective attachment to their heritage (identity), the pragmatic demands of the South African linguistic marketplace (migration context) render this pride insufficient for intergenerational transmission (culture). In summary, this research contributes four primary insights to the field of sociolinguistics:

- The 'Paradox of Vitality': identifying the disconnect in which high emotional pride does not translate into functional language transmission.
- Legal precarity as a linguistic barrier: revealing that asylum and visa instability act as direct catalysts for rapid linguistic assimilation.

- The hostile linguistic marketplace: demonstrating that the dominance of English is a structural response to the specific educational and labour market demands of the South African urban context.
- The fragility of the symbolic anchor: providing empirical evidence (the 46.4% non-transmission rate) that the mother tongue is failing to hold as a functional tool for the second generation.

Consequently, the mother tongue serves as a strong foundation for cultural heritage, yet its transmission is significantly hindered by the challenges of acculturation and the pervasive use of English in the host society. The Nigerian immigrants in this study show a powerful commitment to their cultural identity, employing strategies to maintain their heritage. However, the study reveals the deep difficulties they face in sustaining mother tongue use within families. A multifaceted approach is necessary to effectively support language and cultural preservation. This approach requires creating language education programmes, implementing supportive policies, and developing initiatives that respect and value diverse cultures. Ultimately, nurturing a more inclusive and culturally supportive environment for Nigerian immigrants requires proactive, multi-level interventions that move beyond individual effort and engage with institutional policies and community-based programs. By gaining a deeper understanding of the factors influencing language use, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and culturally supportive environment for immigrant communities.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Temitayo A. Kola-Akanbi: Investigation. Gary W. Collins: Methodology; Supervision; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing. Yanga L.P. Majola: Supervision. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, Gary W. Collins.

Disclaimer

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