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## THE ROLE OF NIGERIAN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN COVID-19 DISCOURSE

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### ABSTRACT

Nigerian Indigenous languages are quintessential to the modus operandi of communication in Nigeria. The indigenous languages are dominated by English language which is a lingua franca in Nigeria. Since the broke out of COVID-19 disease; a 'highly transmittable and pathogenic viral infection' there have been several measures to contain the disease. The need to spread adequate information that will enhance the personal safety of Nigerians has led to the use of the indigenous languages in facilitating information sharing among indigenous people in Nigeria. Consequently, this study investigates the role of the Nigerian indigenous languages in the fight against COVID-19. Methodologically, data were collected through electronic media. Salawu's model for indigenous language developmental communication was adopted for this study. The results of this study show that Nigerian indigenous languages are used in spreading COVID-19 preventive measures, media briefing on National television, health orientation and, medical research. This shows that the Nigerian indigenous languages which overtime has been dominated by English could be very significant at a critical time of medical delivery.

Keywords: communication; COVID-19; indigenous languages

### INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus (Covid-19) is a disease that affects the respiratory tract of human beings. Since the end of 2019 when the disease was observed, it has spread across the world including Nigeria with over 500 indigenous languages. As at the time of writing this paper, the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 globally is 6,281,031 with a record of 375,660 deaths. As of June 1<sup>st</sup> 2020, the total confirmed COVID 19 cases was 10,578 with 299 deaths have been reported in Nigeria. The news of the COVID-19 appearance in Nigeria broke in, on February 25th, 2020, after an Italian man came in from Milan and was diagnosed with the disease. Since then, several orientation programmes have been put in place by the Federal, states, local, and non-governmental organizations in Nigeria to flatten the curve of COVID-19. On this, the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) advised the public to: 1) Regularly and thoroughly wash hands with soap and water, and use alcohol-based hand sanitizer; 2) Maintain at least 1 and half meters (5 feet) distance between oneself and anyone who is coughing or sneezing; 3) Stay home or keep a social distance when having a persistent cough or sneezing; 4) Make sure you and the people around you, follow good respiratory hygiene, meaning cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or into your sleeve at the bent elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze. Then dispose of the used tissue immediately; and 5) Stay home if you feel unwell with symptoms like fever, cough, difficulty in breathing, and call NCDC toll free number which is available day and night, for guidance.

Measures of this nature have been adopted in many countries and crafted in indigenous languages. Across Africa, there have been efforts to spread information on COVID-19 using local languages. Radio France International reported online that similar message has been translated into Zimbabwe indigenous languages; Shona and Ndebele by journalists Elia Ntali and Kudzanai Gerede. It has also been reported that the Congolese authorities have created helpline in nine different local languages. In a similar effort, South Africa is also managing misinformation and orienting people on COVID-19 using Zulu, Sotho, Xhosa and Afrikaans languages. A similar effort has been observed in

Nigeria. It appears that at this very period, the foreign languages such as Chinese, French, German and other foreign languages in Nigeria are not so useful for the COVID-19 discourse among the Nigeria speech community. The indigenous languages are now taking the centre stage. Hence, this paper is set to examine some of the effort by Nigeria to use the Nigerian indigenous languages in the fight against COVID-19.

Nigeria indigenous languages are languages that are local to the Nigerian people. Embedded in the indigenous languages is the cultural identity of the people: norms, values, folk, idioms and so on (Asekere and Asaolu 2020). The importance of indigenous language in medical delivery and campaign has been acknowledged by many scholars such as Yusuff and Fadairo (2013), Igboanusi, Odoje and Ibrahim (2016), Oyesomi, Onakoya, Onyenakeya and Busari (2020) and, Ogunyombo and Bello (2020). Olaoye (2013) classified all languages in Nigeria as follow: 1) The exoglossic languages of English, French and Arabic (and more recently Chinese). 2) The very large indigenous languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba and pidgin. 3) The large languages of Edo, Efik, Ebira, Fulfulde, Idoma, Igala, Kanuri Nupe and Tiv. 4) The twenty unnamed media sized languages otherwise known as minority languages. 5) The 350 small size languages also known as minority languages.

In Nigeria linguistics community, the English language which is a lingua franca has been dominating the indigenous languages in various capacities. However, the indigenous languages remain the major means of communication in rural communities. Languages no matter its size perform an equal and most essential function of communication. In the actual sense, a language could be bigger than another but no language is superior or inferior to another. Languages play a vital role in health care interaction, delivery, awareness, orientation and all aspects of medical discourse. Egbokhare (2011) noting the significance of indigenous languages to medical matters states that: It is important that healthcare workers and beneficiaries can communicate, understand one another and building trust. The native language assures this. It is doubtful if primary healthcare can succeed without addressing the language component. It is not enough to recruit local healthcare workers, linguists and communication experts must provide the technical basis and content which will serve the training needs of the health workers another issue of relevance is the one that relates to access to doctor's prescription and information on drugs. The high level of illiteracy means that a lot of people have no access to information on the medication and dosage which they use....Through language; we can access indigenous medical knowledge. Independent herbal remedies and their function; plants and their uses are often known from the way they are named. Just as we may gain insight into family medical, social, and psychological history through personal names, we can also know a lot about disease, epidemics and medical practices through language

In line with the above, the indigenous language provide means of communication between medical practitioners and the indigenous people in Nigeria especially in a period where all hands must be on deck to defeat any pandemic. At present, there is no cure for COVID-19 disease which is fast spreading everywhere in the world. Most countries including Nigeria are looking inward for a solution. Contrary to the past, everything indigenous including herb for medication and language for communication is highly utilized locally which represent a new phase of thinking. Presently, the foreign languages that are overshadowing the role of the indigenous languages in Nigeria cannot serve as an alternative.

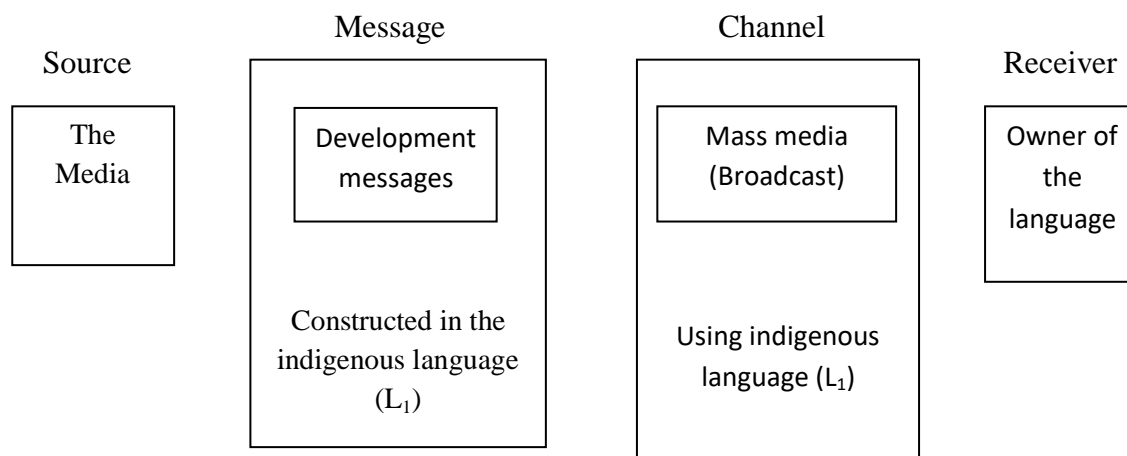
Most studies have proved that the indigenous languages can be used to communicate and develop terms for novel medical cases. For instance, Yusuff and Fadairo (2013) in their studies on how to have effective communication in a medical setting show that Yoruba, one of the major indigenous languages in Nigeria can create terms that will enhance understanding in Medicare. This, the authors said, can be done with the existing words, and when necessary, new words could be created using the linguistic method of compounding, reduplication, coinage, slangs, and borrowing. The authors demonstrate these processes by formulating words for a medical procedure and directional information which includes words for registration, vital signs, blood pressures, temperature, consultation, prescription, drugs,

injection, medical test, urinalysis, stool test, blood test, X-ray, test result, emergency, outpatient and inpatient department, pharmacy, emergency, laboratory, injection and dressing room. The authors work authenticates their claims that Nigerian indigenous languages are capable of facilitating easy communication between medical practitioners and patients.

As regards the fight against the deadly disease, Igboanusi, Odoje and Ibrahim (2016) also argue in their study on Ebola disease, that behavioral change during a novel disease outbreak is better achieved when the appropriate terms associated with the disease are put into the Nigerian indigenous languages. The informants in their study, which was conducted as part of the project that developed medical terms in Ebola discourse into Nigerian three major languages, opined that medical solution will come quickly if diseases and discussions on health matters, such as Ebola, are reduced to the Nigerian indigenous languages. They also noted that using indigenous languages will allow inclusion in the campaign, orientation and creation of awareness on the best way to contain disease outbreak. The study also shows that many Nigerians prefer to discuss medical issue in indigenous languages. This is against the common practices where most medical practitioners get their education in English language and lack adequate knowledge in Nigerian indigenous languages which create communication barriers with people who speak only the Nigerian indigenous languages. Obiorah (2021) concentrates on various types of pronunciation of the word coronavirus in Nigeria and argue that foreign articulated words are better localized for smooth discourse. The current study will contribute to the literature on the role of language languages in health related issue.

## **METHOD**

The theoretical orientation adopted for this study is developmental communication theory for indigenous language proposed by Salawu (2015). This model recognizes that information should be gathered and delivered in indigenous languages. According to Salawu (2015), the information should be gathered with L1 and delivered to the speaker through the same L1. The schema for developmental communication in an indigenous African language is presented below:



The sketch above illustrates the presupposition that the media would source information using indigenous languages and deliver the message to the audience (owners of the language) using the same indigenous language. The channel could be through television, radio, internet or social media. According to this model, it is required that questions and answers, instructions and orientations of indigenous people should be in the indigenous language. In other words, it should not be that information should be gathered in; for instance, English or Chinese and get delivered in Yoruba. The advantage of this model is that there is a connection between media and language users. Besides the fact that this model is culturally sensitive, the model is also in tune with social realities of the

indigenous language users because it helps listeners to understand the message better and enhance the development of the Nigerian indigenous languages.

Data were collected through electronic media. The recording of the COVID-19 Presidential Task Forces daily briefing was downloaded from Channels Television YouTube account, while the videos/cartoons, and music were sourced from Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp during the national lockdown. The major motivation for using this method to gather data is that it enables the researcher to collect data without violating federal and state government order on COVID-19 in Nigeria.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The result of this research shows that instruction, briefing and orientation, and research on COVID-19 were carried out using Nigerian indigenous languages. The findings are presented and discussed below:

### 1. Medical Instruction on COVID 19 Preventive measures in Major Nigerian indigenous languages.

The instruction by NCDC on COVID-19 were adopted and circulated into the three Nigerian major languages of Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. The samples of instructions on these Nigerian languages were produced by the University of Ibadan geography department lab and circulated on social media. The Sample is presented below:

Sample 1 in Yoruba

*Coronavirus Wò Nitòótó*

1. *Fi omi àti ose fo owó re daradara*
2. *Má bọwọ pelu tabi dimo eniken*
3. *Ti o ba fe sin tabi mi'ko se é si igbúnwọ re*
4. *Yàgò fún ibi ti èrò po sí.*
5. *Se amúlò ohun èlò ifowo ti ó èròjà ọti nínú*

Sample 2 in Hausa

*Gasikiya na coronavirus*

*Kar ka manta ka wanke hannum ka*

1. *Wanke hannum ka sosia de sabulu de ruwa*
2. *Giyi musayar musayar abubuwa tara da shaka tara da wasu mutare\*
3. *Tara konnawke a akin gwiwar hannu ka*
4. *Kauce wa wuraren aunkoso ko tara*
5. *Ka yi amfani da tsabtaccen maigiya*

Sample 3 in Igbo

*Coronavirus di ire*

*Echefukwala nkea*

1. *Jiri ncha na mmiri sachapu aka gi nke oma.*
2. *Zere ikwe ndi mmadu n'aka na ibe ha oma*
3. *Kwenye ukwara na azuzu n'obu aka gi*
4. *Zere igwe mmadu*
5. *Nwere akoholic sanitizer kwa aka*

Translation of sample 1, 2, and 3 in English

Coronavirus is real

Don't forget

1. Wash your hand properly with soap and water
2. Avoid handshakes and hugs
3. Cough or sneeze into your elbow
4. Avoid crowd places and large gathering
5. Use an alcoholic based sanitizer)

Sample 1-3 represent the instructions on how to prevent, contact or transfer of COVID-19 disease written in three Nigerian Indigenous languages of Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. The quality of writing is beyond this paper, but definitely, the crafting of these messages in these languages will serve as a means of instruction for those who can read in those three languages. Such instructions are also broadcasted in different television and radio stations by NCDC through their ambassadors. These NCDC appoints well known Nollywood actors and actresses who could speak the Nigerian indigenous languages as ambassadors. These ambassadors take NCDC message to the audience. From the observation of the researchers, these instructions, especially by the NCDC ambassador, are updated as health measures changes from time to time. These instructions in Nigerian indigenous languages are always aired on different national television even though most of the televisions broadcast were mainly in English.

The use of Nigerian indigenous languages instead of English only has many implications. First, it increases the use of Nigerian indigenous languages in the public sphere especially in health sector discourse at a period where families are under national lockdown. This will, in turn, provide an opportunity for children to listen to these actors and actresses they see as a role model, speak the Nigerian indigenous languages. To some extent, this will consciously change the attitude of most people who resent the speaking of these Nigerian indigenous languages and make them think twice especially those who think that speaking the Nigerian indigenous languages makes them inferior. It is also important to note that similar instruction on COVID-19 has been translated into Nigerian indigenous languages of Hausa, Kanuri, Yoruba, and Igbo by the United Nations in Nigeria who made it into posters of different size. Borno Government and other states governments were also reported to have made a poster of COVID-19 message in the indigenous languages of immediate communities in their various states. Besides writing the instruction in Nigerian languages, several short music videos clips were made in indigenous languages encouraging people to adhere to the NCDC measures on COVID-19. The sample of the content of such music in Igbo is presented below:

*O koko ba anyi na chi ejie, che e nwere ehie jie, oya Korona virus, ma a ga-ejizi egwu dara enwe n'enu, ka onye obula kwaba aka ya kwasie ya ike, kwa mgbe kwa mgbe, goo handsanitizer tebe ya n'aka---nwere face mask gbuchie ime, gbuchie onu, onye no n'ibe ya afutakwaha afuta. Onye obula nwee ndi ha site n'ike chukwu na anyi ga-agbanari oya koro.*

*Chorus...kworona virus bu ajo ahia....onye obodo oyibo*

(translation in the English language: Night has come in the day time, COVID-19 disease, I won't run away because of fire. Everyone should start washing his/her hands. Wash the hands very well. Wash it regularly, buy and use hand sanitizer. Use a face mask to cover your nose and mouth. Everyone in his house, do not come outside. Everyone be patient. By the grace of God, we will overcome this COVID 19 disease.

*Chorus...COVID 19 is a bad sickness, sickness from abroad.)*

It is really interesting to see that local artist could sing on COVID-19 in Nigerian indigenous languages within the short period just to spread the COVID-19 message. Similar songs exist in other local languages in Nigeria. The amazing thing is that these songs are voluntarily composed in Nigerian indigenous languages by people adjudged to be less educated. These individually see the need to sing about the COVID-19 knowing that majority of the population understand the indigenous languages very well. It also shows how intelligent and proactive these local artists are on an occasion such as this. Their songs in one way or the other will affect the people in a special way especially the speakers of these languages. Such similar song has been made by Anambra Broadcasting Service Awka: a station owned by Anambra state government.

## 2. COVID-19 daily media briefing in Nigerian Indigenous languages.

At the broadcast media level, the Nigerian Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 presents a daily briefing on COVID-19 on national television. Several national news houses broadcast both in English

language and indigenous languages with a large audience. Such station includes Voice of Nigeria, Tiwa n' Tiwa FM and Bond FM. These stations have millions of Nigerian listeners. Journalists from these stations do ask questions either English or any Nigerian languages. Consequently, some journalists that broadcast in indigenous languages asked their question in Nigerian languages. Most times, the journalists do introduce themselves and their stations and require the members of the Presidential Task Force committee to answer the question in the indigenous languages (especial Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa) because of audience. Their questions are answered in any of the languages they were asked. Members of the committee only answer questions in the Nigerian indigenous language that they are competent in. For instance, a member of the committee who is an Igbo speaker was never asked to answer a question in Yoruba, same with Hausa and Yoruba speakers. The criterion seems like, the member of the Presidential Task Force who is being asked a question and the journalist asking such question must be able to speak the same indigenous language. This leaves one to wonder how interesting it will be if all the members of the task force can speak in the major, if not all Nigerian languages. As at the time of writing this paper, a total of 17 questions of seventy-nine minutes, three seconds have been answered in Nigerian indigenous languages by the presidential task force. A sample of answer in Igbo by the NCDC Director is presented below:

NCDS BOSS replies in the Igbo language:

*O maka ndi na-anochite.... na-eme ka ndi no n'unoogwu a, ka ha nodu n'egbe ha no. Ndi kwesiri iru oru a bu ndi na aru oru a mgbe niile, o bu ndi na aru oru a mgbe niile, O police na-aruru mbu, o kwa ha na-aruru ya kita. Anyi achoghi ka anyi jiri egbe jide ndi mmadu ebe ha no, anyi choro ka onye obula si n'aka nke ya kwe na o na-ano n'ebe a ga-agwo ya, ka ahu di onye obula osiso ka ha nwee ike ina, ngwa dalunu.*

(Translation in English: Concerning those who are securing..., are making sure that people stay in their isolation centres. Those who are assigned to perform such function are the ones doing it always. It is the job of the police, they are the ones taking care of that now, and we don't want to stay in the isolation centre by force so that they can get well as quickly as possible. Yeah, thank you)

The above samples which represent the use of Nigerian indigenous languages on national television have many implications. First, it shows that the Nigerian indigenous languages are not just localised archaic community languages as some do think, rather they can perform social functions like some of the highly studied languages of the world. This is highly important comparing the attitude towards the study of Nigerian indigenous languages in schools. The use of the indigenous languages in the media also means that the graduate of Nigerian indigenous languages will be needed in the media house in the long run to facilitate social discourse in the local languages. Secondly, seeing the political elites and journalist working in top media houses communicating in the Nigerian indigenous languages will spur the young ones to engage in learning the local languages, especially those who desire to be journalist and politicians in future.

### 3. Use of indigenous language for cartoon and a short video on COVID-19.

In response to the fight against COVID-19, the Nigerian film-maker Niyi Akinmolayan created a short cartoon that informs people about the COVID-19 disease. In his statement available on his Instagram page, the actor says that he:

Noticed most of the information and awareness on the coronavirus is in big English. Meanwhile, a huge number of our population can't understand. So I have cut out 2mins videos in Yoruba, Igbo and Pidgin. Swipe for different versions (couldn't get Hausa person in a short time). These videos are meant to be shared on WhatsApp. Download the folder via my boi link.) let's share fact in the same places of rumours are being shared.

This was the message before the download link for the short video clip. The beauty of the video is that it appeals to adults, youth and children. Apart from the fact that such video is creating awareness on

COVID-19, it represents an excellent way of projecting what one can do with the indigenous languages in a period such as this. Concisely, it will stimulate interest in the Nigerian indigenous languages and enable those who are not competent in English to comprehend medical awareness.

There are other shot videos in Nigerian indigenous languages that have been created for COVID-19 awareness. A video of short drama in Yoruba on StarTimes Nigeria (a Television decoder) was captured as follow:

*Funke & Azeez*

*Azeez: Funké, wòó mo fẹ̀ lọ gbá bóólù*

*Funké: Azeez, níbo ni ò n' lọ, sé ò gbõ, wí pé COVID 19 wà níta ni'*

*Azeez: COVID 19 wo ni, ò n' pa iró ni jò, kò, sí nńkan kan, níta.*

*Funké: Tí o bá lọ sí ita, tí o ba kó ààrùn COVID 19 yìi, tí daddy bá kò lara rẹ̀ kò sí Sharwama àti sinema mó nìyẹn, tí mummy bá ko, kò sí Jóllof rice mó nìyẹn, panbanbàrì rẹ̀ ijòba ma wa mú mummy àti daddy lọ nìyẹn.*

*Azeez: Haa Funké iró ni o*

*Funké: Ẹ̀wọ̀ sí ilẹ̀kùn kí o wo ita*

*Azeez: Haa òótó, ni o, mi ò lọ gbá bóólù mó, o ẹ̀ Funké. (Ó sá wolè).*

(Translation to English

Azeez: Funke see, I want to go and play and ball

Funke: Azeez where are you going to, haven't you heard of that COVID-19 is outside.

Azeez: which COVID-19, you are lying, it doesn't exist

Funke: if you step out and get infected, and you infect our daddy, no more Sharwama and Cinema again and if Mummy should contact it from you, no more Jollof rice, and to top all, Mummy and daddy will be arrested.

Azeez: it's a lie Funke, that is not true

Funke: Open the door and check outside

Azeez: Its true o, I'm not playing ball again, thank you.)

The video was meant to create awareness about COVID-19 to the kids. In this video, two kids were seen talking to each other. There is no doubt that through this, the children get to fall in love with the Nigerian indigenous languages while getting maximum information on any important health matter. It also opens the mind of the children to what they can do with the indigenous languages in future. The use of the indigenous languages as above also provides an opportunity for children to bond and learn how to interact with one another in Yoruba.

#### 4. Use of indigenous Nigerian languages in local research

The Nigeria indigenous languages are also playing a key role in the area of research in traditional medicine for COVID-19. Some traditional and non-traditional scientist employs local language speakers in their research in traditional herbs. This is because the name of most vegetables and herb that build immunity are easily located in indigenous languages spoken in many rural communities in Nigeria. The Ooni of Ife has done tremendous research in local help as regard COVID-19.

Imagine what will happen if one goes to Nigeria rural community to ask for vegetable called *Telfairia occidentalis*, *Corchorus*, *Vernonia amygdalina*, and *Gnetun africanum*. There will be confusion among those in the rural area if a researcher starts rolling out the botanical and English names of those herbs. Searching for those vegetables and herbs are made easy once researchers come down in Nigerian communities and simply request for the indigenous names of these herbs. For instance, *Telfairia occidentalis* or fluted pumpkin leaves are simply known as ugu in Igbo language, *Corchorus* or jute leaves is known as ewedu in Yoruba language, *Vernonia amygdalina* or bitter leaf simply is known as shuwaka in Hausa while *Gnetun africanum* or african jointfir is known as afang in Ibibio. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, most researchers are now getting used to indigenous languages, at least the working knowledge for research.

Besides the above, the traditional rulers and community leaders who have been saddled with educating the local community on COVID-19 have been going about carrying their responsibility using the indigenous languages. According to NCDC, the Nigerian indigenous languages will be very important for contact tracing in the rural communities. One can only imagine how difficult it will be to do contact tracing with English, French, Chinese language or any other foreign languages in the rural communities. These may have been the reason why the Presidential task force had to result in the use of indigenous language in the daily briefing on COVID 19. We also know that the Nigerian indigenous languages also contain wise saying. Not much research has been carried out to know how much the traditional sayings have helped people to fight the negative psychological impact of COVID-19 pandemic when religious activities were not asked to open by the federal government. The indigenous value system which exists in the Nigerian indigenous languages in the form of proverbs, idioms and anecdote would in one way or the other contribute to the psychological fight and survival of many Nigerians during this pandemic. There is no doubt that the role of indigenous languages during this COVID-19 pandemic will boost the status of indigenous languages in general and continue to enhance medical discourse in future.

## **CONCLUSION**

The use of indigenous languages on television and electronic media shows that the Nigerian indigenous languages can and have advanced the knowledge on COVID-19 disease. However, a lot needs to be done. Many people in the rural area are not taking the awareness and orientation of COVID-19 seriously because of the language barrier. Most of them do not have internet access for social information, some who have radio, television and telephone do not have means to power their electronic gadget, consequently, village town criers, traditional poets and more community leaders who can use the indigenous language dialects very well need to be incorporated into the awareness and orientation programmes on COVID-19. Following the usefulness and the important role of the Nigerian indigenous languages in the attempt to flatten the COVID-19 curve, it is expedient that the study and broadcasting in indigenous language should be given serious attention henceforth.

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