



## Language Accessibility and Communication Challenges among the Igbo and Deaf Communities in Lagos

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**Abstract.** This study evaluates the extent to which Igbo language and sign language are accessible within key institutional domains in Lagos State, Nigeria. Lagos is a multilingual metropolis where speakers of several Nigerian languages interact daily; however, language access for minority language groups and deaf individuals remains inconsistent. The study investigates five domains: healthcare institutions, courts, broadcast media, religious institutions, and political spaces. Data were collected through interviews with officials in selected institutions, media reports, and participant observation. Findings indicate that both Igbo language and sign language remain underrepresented in institutional communication structures. While limited sign language interpretation exists in some television stations and churches, consistent interpretation across domains is rare. Similarly, Igbo language, though widely spoken among migrants in Lagos, is rarely formally accommodated in public services. The study concludes that meaningful linguistic inclusion requires institutional policies that support both indigenous spoken languages and sign language. Such measures will improve communication access, social participation, and civic inclusion for marginalized linguistic communities in Lagos.

**Keywords:** Sign language, Igbo language, linguistic access, Lagos, multilingualism, deaf community

### 1. Introduction

Language plays a crucial role in access to public services and social participation. Individuals who cannot communicate effectively in institutional settings often experience exclusion from vital social, legal, and medical services. In multilingual urban centers such as Lagos, communication barriers affect both migrant language speakers and the deaf community. Sign language remains the primary means of communication for deaf individuals. Without sign language interpretation, deaf people frequently encounter serious challenges in hospitals, courts,

schools, religious spaces, and political environments. These barriers limit their participation in everyday activities and reduce their ability to access essential information. At the same time, Lagos hosts large populations of internal migrants from different regions of Nigeria. Among these groups are Igbo speakers from southeastern Nigeria. Although Igbo is one of the three major Nigerian languages, its institutional presence in Lagos is limited because Yoruba and English dominate most public spaces. As a result, many Igbo speakers rely on English or Yoruba when interacting with institutions even when these languages are not their strongest means of communication.

The motivation for this paper is to explore how Igbo and deaf people access information in many places essential to the quality of life they (deaf people) live daily. According to Tagwirei (2021), sign language is the primary means of communication for deaf individuals. In Lagos, Nigeria, deaf people face significant communication barriers since most residents, including their families do not know sign language. Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals require daily communication access in various settings like hospitals, courts, religious institutions, schools, and political arenas. Sign language is essential for their participation and access to information. Although 31 countries, mainly in Europe, have recognized sign language as an official language (Timmerman 2015), Nigeria has not followed suit. Human Rights Watch stresses the importance of sign language development for promoting the rights, social welfare, and linguistic freedom of deaf individuals. This highlights the need for minority language rights, including access to sign language, to be recognized and protected by judicial authorities. In addition to the inability to speak dominant official languages such as English and Yoruba, deaf individuals in densely populated cities like Lagos, Nigeria face various social challenges. With a population of over 15 million, Lagos presents unique obstacles for the deaf community. While researchers like Yusuf and Fadairo (2013), Dada and

Owolabi (2013), Nlem and Anurudu (2013), and Melefa, Adeosun, and Adisa (2013) have investigated language access in different domains (medical, religious, educational, and government) in Nigeria, their focus has been exclusively on spoken languages. There is a significant knowledge gap regarding sign language access, and Igbo language is regarded as migrants' language particularly in Lagos, due to Nigeria's prevailing emphasis on language of immediate environment.

The 1999 Nigerian constitution, as amended, covers the rights of Nigerian citizens, including the deaf, to access their language even as defendants. The Freedom of Information Act 2011 also allows Nigerians access to information, although not specific to any Nigerian language. The Nigerian Broadcasting Code (2014) prioritizes local languages (indigenous sign language included) for community broadcasts, while public and private services have flexibility. The 2023 Nigerian National Language Policy requires at least 60% of broadcast programs to be in local languages (Article 8). Although these National laws support language access, they do not dictate the number of languages. The purpose of these laws is to protect linguistic rights. English is the official spoken language of the court in Nigeria and is readily used; every other language requires special arrangements, especially the Indigenous languages. Nigerian indigenous sign languages are marginalized and underdeveloped. American Sign Language (ASL) and British Sign Language (BSL) are foreign sign languages used in public places. (Asonye 2014). Nigeria has yet to fully institutionalize sign language access across sectors. Similarly, while Nigerian indigenous languages are recognized culturally, their use in formal institutions remains inconsistent. This study therefore examines how both Igbo language and sign language function within important social domains in Lagos. By focusing on hospitals, courts, broadcast media, religious institutions, and political spaces, the research aims to determine the level of linguistic accessibility available to deaf individuals and Igbo-speaking residents in the city.

## 2. Linguistic Situation in Lagos, Nigeria

Lagos State, located in Nigeria's Southwest, is a multilingual area with roughly 20 million inhabitants. It ranks among Africa's most linguistically varied urban hubs. The metropolis hosts speakers of Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, English, and multiple minority tongues. Migration and economic attraction make Igbo speakers a notable community in Lagos. Numerous markets, business districts, and neighborhoods function partially in Igbo. Yet institutional discourse

in Lagos continues to favor English and Yoruba. This produces a mismatch between residents' language practices and official formal communication.

For deaf inhabitants, conditions grow even more intricate. Deaf persons depend on sign language to communicate, but nearly all organizations lack interpreters or personnel skilled in signing. As a result, they frequently turn to family members or unofficial mediators to obtain services. The presence of both spoken minority tongues and sign language underscores the urgency for a broader communication model within Lagos. Recognizing how these languages function across major sectors remains vital to ensuring fair access to information and services. This research seeks to fill that void by examining sign language provision in crucial fields such as healthcare, courts, religious settings, information sharing, and government in Lagos, where deaf community communication requirements remain neglected for the local deaf population today.

This study investigates how these two languages are used in key Lagos sectors: education, healthcare, religious institutions, television broadcasting, and the judiciary. By examining their communicative role in these domains, the research aims to understand how they contribute to the well-being and inclusion of minority communities in such essential spaces.

## 3. Research Methodology

Data gathering involved a survey of sign and Igbo language access across selected domains and interviews with seven senior staff from the organizations studied (none of whom are deaf). Unfortunately, these officials rarely work directly with deaf individuals, though they shape policies affecting them; deaf persons themselves were not interviewed. I monitored news reports and conducted personal observations of signage announcing interpreter availability in schools, hospitals, and courts. I also tracked language interpretation on television channels, in churches, and at political gatherings. The direct participant-observation method gave the hearing researcher first-hand insight into real-time language interaction and interpretation within each domain. Three hours of observation were logged on each site-visit day. Collection spanned December 2020 through December 2022. Across all domains, the number of deaf people present was indeterminable, except at one church, where sixty-seven deaf attendees (adults and children) were counted during Sunday services.

The study analyses its data qualitatively, guided by Salawu's (2015) 'developmental communication

theory for indigenous language'. Here, "indigenous language" refers to the community's first languages (both sign and spoken) excluding colonial languages such as English and French, even where those function officially. The model holds that development messages should be sourced and delivered in people's own indigenous language, so receivers understand more fully. Using the same shared language, it argues, strengthens mutual comprehension and interaction.

#### 4. Igbo and Sign Language Access in The Hospital

Igbo-speaking patients occasionally face communication problems when clinicians lack Igbo proficiency. Even though many health workers use English, some patients prefer expressing symptoms in their mother tongue. In the absent adequate linguistic support, misinterpretations can arise during diagnosis and treatment. Likewise, Deaf Lagos residents attend hospitals expecting full access through sign-language interpreters or signing doctors. Yet the study finds Lagos hospitals do not supply interpreters, and most physicians cannot sign. One Ikeja facility I visited claimed interpreter services but offered no evidence. The state's two main federal and state hospitals also fail to guarantee clear communication with deaf patients. The Nation's Newspaper (22 May 2013) reported fatal outcomes from these barriers, and little has changed since. With overwhelming numbers of hearing patients, deaf individuals face especially dangerous risks in emergencies, underscoring the urgent need for sign-language access in healthcare.

The Universal Health Law guarantees everyone medical care regardless of language, but for Deaf people that right depends on sign language from either clinicians who can sign or professional interpreters. In reality, private hospitals in Lagos have a dire shortage of interpreters, and signing medical staffs are virtually absent, especially in emergencies. Doctors therefore fall back on relatives or lip-reading, unless a Deaf patient brings a personal interpreter. Hospitals must provide interpreters to secure accurate diagnosis, proper treatment, and safe care. As Sundos (2018) noted that better communication with Deaf patients is essential to avoid errors and complications. Health facilities bear a fundamental duty to uphold Deaf people's right to care.

#### 5. Igbo and Sign Language Access in The Courts

Courts, unlike hospitals, do not post notices about sign-language interpreters, and judges, lawyers, and staff are rarely fluent in signing. The Independent

Newspaper (6 Feb 2020) reported that Deaf victims of sexual abuse and other offences in Lagos encounter justice barriers because courts lack communication support. It cited multiple Ikeja High Court cases delayed by missing interpreters. In the 2017, *State v. Emmanuel Umoh\_matter*, Justice Sybil Nwaka of the Ikeja Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Court observed as *The Independent* (20 Feb 2020) recounted:

We (the state) need to get the services of sign language interpreters and we need them as soon as possible... therefore, this court needs to be equipped with sign language instructors, we need the Attorney-General's involvement because we have a lot of cases involving deaf and dumb children that are being defiled. Let the Attorney-General know that defendants need legal aid, as we also have issues with defendants not being represented in court.

Visits to several state high courts and magistrates' courts confirm that nothing has changed. As noted earlier, the 1999 Nigerian Constitution (as amended) guarantees all citizens, including the Deaf persons, the right to access language, even when standing trial. Michael (2016:215) puts it:

*It is a trite law that where an accused person does not understand official language of the court, an interpreter must interpret correctly to the accused person anything said in the language he does not understand. Simultaneously, there should be adequate interpretation to the court anything said by the accused person. The value and importance of interpretation of proceedings to an accused person are not in doubt.*

As noted, English is Nigeria's official court language; all others require interpreters or translators. Sign language is not taught in Lagos law schools, so any signing legal officer learned it privately. There's no evidence that judges or magistrates in Lagos courts can sign, meaning Deaf access to legal services remains severely limited. Igbo speakers also hit barriers when proceedings run solely in English. While some courts sporadically offer Yoruba or other interpretation, it's inconsistent. Real justice demands institutionalized, professional interpreters for sign language and the underused indigenous languages.

#### 6. Igbo and Sign-Language Access in Broadcast Media

Igbo-language programming remains scarce in Lagos despite a sizable Igbo-speaking audience. A few private outlets air occasional Igbo content, yet major TV stations favor English and Yoruba. Only NTA and LTV offer daily sign-language interpretation for

evening news - NTA at 7 pm, LTV at 6 pm. Both claim broader usage, but that overstates reality. Their interpreters (hired by federal and state governments) appear mainly for special events such as presidential chats, Democracy Day broadcast and, during COVID-19, for the Presidential Task Force briefings on Channels TV and NTA, a joint effort of the Commission for Persons with Disabilities and the NBC. Beyond those instances in the above, sign language appears in niche shows such as Judge Funke's Moot Court (an ADR program on TVC and social media) which includes an interpreter. Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministry TV also provides interpreted reruns of its Anti-Infirmity Missiles Prayers and Power Must Change Hands; however, the interpreter's frame is often too small for viewers at a distance to read clearly. Among Lagos Deaf Christians, Dove TV carries interpreted sermons by Pastor E.A. Adeboye for most RCCG broadcasts, available daily. Yet apart from these few stations, most Lagos broadcasters employ no interpreters, a gap Deaf advocates have protested. Former Information Minister Lai Mohammed responded to those complaints as follows:

"I am very touched by the contribution of the young lady who said there is a need for sign interpreters during the network news and other major news belts, ... I am going to ask the NBC to direct all our television stations to ensure that there are sign interpreters in all television stations during their major news hours. This will not apply to only the Nigerian Television Authority. Whether public or private television stations, they must comply with the directive. This directive will work both ways. It means the complaint of exclusion will be tackled and the persons with disability of hearing will also be included in programmes and policies of government".

The federal government has yet to issue and enforce a mandate requiring television stations to incorporate sign language interpretation. Even if such a directive were to be implemented, its success would hinge on television stations hiring and training sign language interpreters, which would necessitate significant investment and resources. Currently, both the Nigerian federal government and the Lagos state government appear to be lacking in their commitment to prioritizing this initiative.

### **7. Igbo and Sign-Language Access in Religious Spaces**

Religious institutions are central to Lagos community life. A handful of churches offer sign-language interpretation so Deaf worshippers can participate fully, but such provision is limited. Notable examples

include the Christian Mission for the Deaf (Apata Street, Somolu) founded by American missionary Andrew Foster in 1970, inaugurated 2017, which uses only sign language, giving Deaf members a space to socialize and worship natively. St Brigid's Catholic Church (Ijeshatedo, Surulere) interprets Mass, the Redeemed Christian Church of God (Ebutemeta, Pastor E.A. Adeboye) interprets all programmes, and The New Frontier Church's Talking Finger Ministry also serves Deaf congregants. In these churches, leaders know sign language, enabling clear communication. Beyond worship, the Bible Society of Nigeria is creating video resources for Deaf and hard-of-hearing Christians. In an online report, Mr. Zacchaeus Gbolade stated:

"The Bible Society of Nigeria, BSN has completed the translation of additional 77 Chronological Bible Stories, CBS in Nigerian Sign Language for the deaf. The Sign Language Bible, which is in video format and available on memory stick, is designed to meet the scriptural needs of the hearing impaired ....the Bible stories, though expensive, are distributed free of charge to the deaf community. ... The first 77 Chronological Bible stories for the deaf were dedicated in 2014. 33 more stories were added in 2017, additional 35 in 2021 bringing the total number of CBS to 145. With the completion of additional 77 Bible stories, we now have 222 Chronological Bible Stories in the Nigerian Sign Language. Translation work is ongoing as we are now set to commence the translation of the New Testament for the deaf. .... The Bible Society of Nigeria is committed to breaking any known barriers that make the word of God inaccessible to the people. The sighted, the blind and the deaf now have unhindered access to the word of God in Nigeria, to the glory of God".

Although RCCG, MFM, Catholic, and Christian Mission for the Deaf consciously include interpretation, most Lagos churches neglect it. With countless congregations in the city, only a few have embraced sign language, hampering evangelism, discipleship, and teaching for Deaf/hard-of-hearing people. As Tagwirei (2021) observes, "The church should approach the deaf not as impaired individuals but as people with unique contributions to share with others." Similarly, Igbo-migrant churches sometimes hold services in Igbo during special events, showing how inclusion strengthens participation. Wider adoption of sign interpretation and multilingual services would deepen accessibility. Of course, these practices demonstrate how language inclusion can strengthen community participation. Nevertheless, broader adoption of sign language interpretation and multilingual services would further enhance accessibility.

## 8. Igbo and Sign Language Access in Political Space

Political participation hinges on access to policy, election, and governance information. Deaf people often encounter barriers because campaigns and public notices seldom include sign-language interpretation. Lagos has never had a Deaf political leader, unlike elsewhere - Rachel Arfa (Chicago), Jack Ashley (Stoke), Amanda Folendorf (Northern California), Gary Malkowski (Canada's first Deaf MP), and Mojo Mathers (NZ). Deaf Lagosians aspire to serve like hearing peers, but linguistic hurdles, not ability, limit them. While Deaf voter data is missing, demand is rising to enforce political rights; Anambra's Deaf community, for example, protested denial of voting rights ahead of the 2017 governorship poll.

Unless sign language is developed and used in governance, Deaf exclusion will persist. Of Nigeria's 18 registered parties, only APC and PDP provide interpreters at presidential rallies, senatorial, governorship, and house campaigns omit this aid. Lagos State, however, is training selected civil servants in basic sign language to improve interaction. The General Manager of the Lagos State Office for Disability Affairs, Mr. Oluwadamilare Ogundairo, supports inclusive communication, noting that Deaf persons are fully human. He calls sign language fundamental to communication and Lagos identity, "no one left behind." Igbo-speaking residents likewise struggle when politics defaults to Yoruba. Inclusive governance means political actors must recognize the electorate's linguistic diversity.

## 9. Conclusion

Nigeria's 1999 Constitution guarantees information access, yet in Lagos Igbo speakers and Deaf signers still hit daily language barriers, in hospitals, courts, media, politics, and worship. The fix isn't mysterious: hire trained interpreters and weave these languages into public life, like Zimbabwean hospitals that now train doctors in sign (Nyakanyanga 2017). Research agrees language gaps are the main obstacle for Deaf people (Souza et al. 2017; Orrie & Motsohi 2018). Without Igbo and sign-language provision, basic rights stay out of reach.

Governments and organizations have recognized these language challenges faced by these communities, leading to various local and international legislation aimed at preventing discrimination. Examples of such legislation include the 1971 Declaration of the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons and the 1975

Declaration on the Right of Disabled Persons (Sands, 2010). While these legislations are not exclusively focused on the deaf population, they pave the way for governments to enforce sign language access in critical areas that impact the daily lives of deaf individuals in Lagos. It is imperative for the government and authorities to take responsibility and provide solutions to alleviate the suffering and communication challenges faced by the deaf community. As highlighted in this paper, sign and Igbo language interpretation, which enables language access, is grossly underutilized. The deaf community especially is often invisible, but enhanced use of sign and other migrant languages can significantly improve their experiences in these critical areas.

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