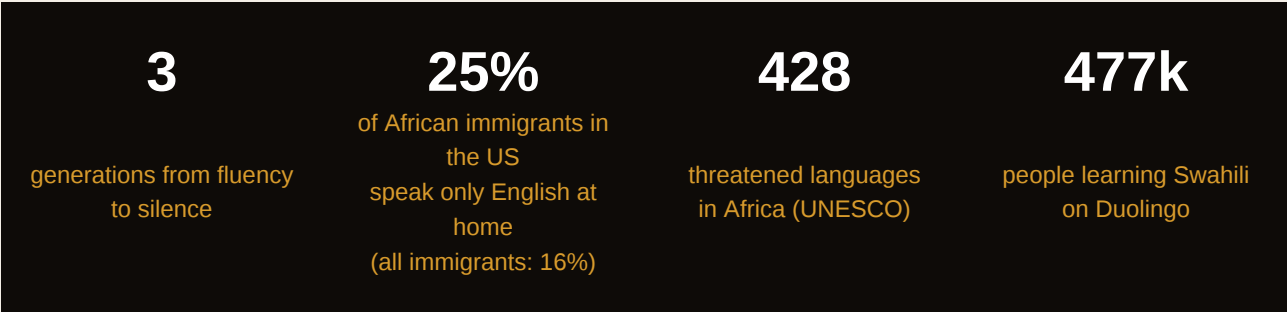


AGF RESEARCH · FACT-CHECKED · 2026

Three Generations

to silence.

Somewhere there is a grandmother who cannot have a conversation with her grandchildren. Nobody decided this. It happened one convenient English sentence at a time. The research says it takes **three generations** for a migrating family to lose its language — and that African families are losing theirs **faster than almost anyone else**.



How much of the language survives

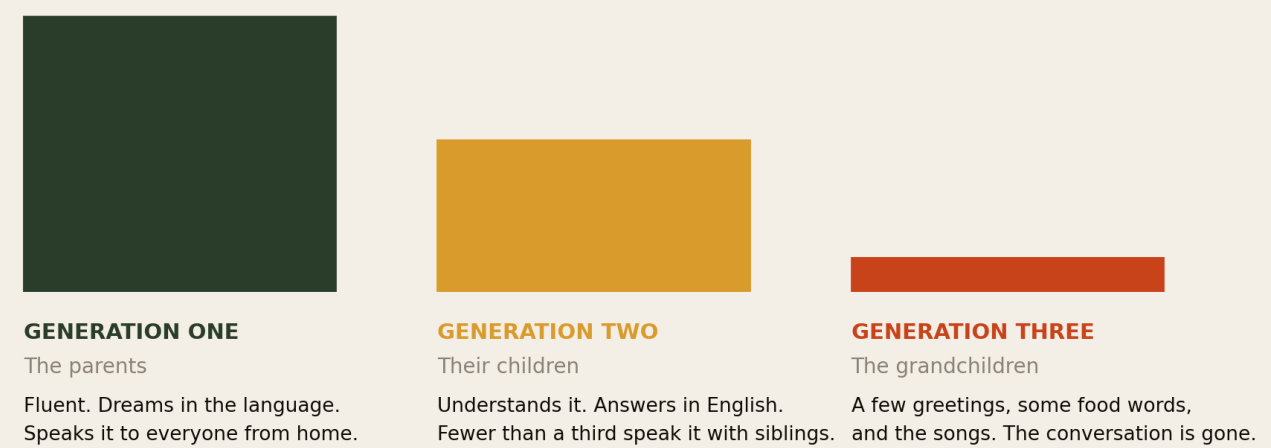


Fig 1 — The three-generation pattern of heritage language loss, documented across immigrant groups. Bar heights are illustrative; the stages are from the research literature.

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01 · The Short Version

Every diaspora family knows the scene. The parents speak Yoruba, or Twi, or Amharic, or Somali to each other. They speak English to the children — for good reasons, at the time. The children understand the language but answer in English. The grandchildren get greetings, food words, and the songs. The conversation is gone.

- **The pattern is documented and it is universal.** Across immigrant groups, the home language is fluent in the **first generation**, understood-but-not-spoken in the **second**, and gone by the **third**. The landmark study in *Demography* called it “only English by the third generation.”
- **African families are on the fast track.** 25% of sub-Saharan African immigrants in the US speak *only English* at home — against 16% of all immigrants. For Liberians it is 68%; for South Africans, 56%. The colonial language head start becomes a heritage language handicap.
- **The loss happens earlier than the folklore says.** The literature says the third generation loses the language, but **the shift happens in the second**: in a comparable UK study of second-generation children, most understood their heritage language, yet **fewer than a third spoke it with their own siblings**.
- **The languages are not safe at home either.** UNESCO counts roughly **428 threatened languages in Africa** and classifies **Igbo as endangered despite ~20 million speakers**. The diaspora is not losing something the homeland will keep for it.
- **The regret is measurable.** Over **477,000 people** are learning Swahili on Duolingo; apps like Nkenne exist purely to teach diaspora adults the languages their childhood homes stopped speaking.
- **And keeping the language costs almost nothing.** The practices that work — a stated home-language policy, grandparents as immersion, requiring children to *answer* in the language — are free. What they cost is consistency.

A language does not die in an argument. It dies in convenience — one answered-in-English question at a time, in homes full of love.

02 · The Rule of Three Generations

This is one of the most consistently replicated findings in the study of migration. The landmark analysis in *Demography* examined the grandchildren of immigrants to the United States and asked whether any group escaped the pattern. Essentially none did. The first generation speaks the mother tongue. The second is bilingual on paper — but tilted, using the heritage language with parents and the dominant language everywhere else. The third generation speaks English, full stop. Fig 1 on the cover shows the shape.

- **It does not require anyone to reject anything.** No generation decides to abandon the language. Each makes locally sensible choices — English for school, English for friends, English because it is faster — and the sum of sensible choices is extinction in the home.
- **It survives love, pride and intention.** Families that treasure their culture lose the language on the same schedule as families that do not, unless they change specific behaviours. Sentiment is not transmission.
- **It is a default, not a destiny.** The same literature documents the exceptions — and the exceptions share practices, not feelings.

03 · The African Paradox

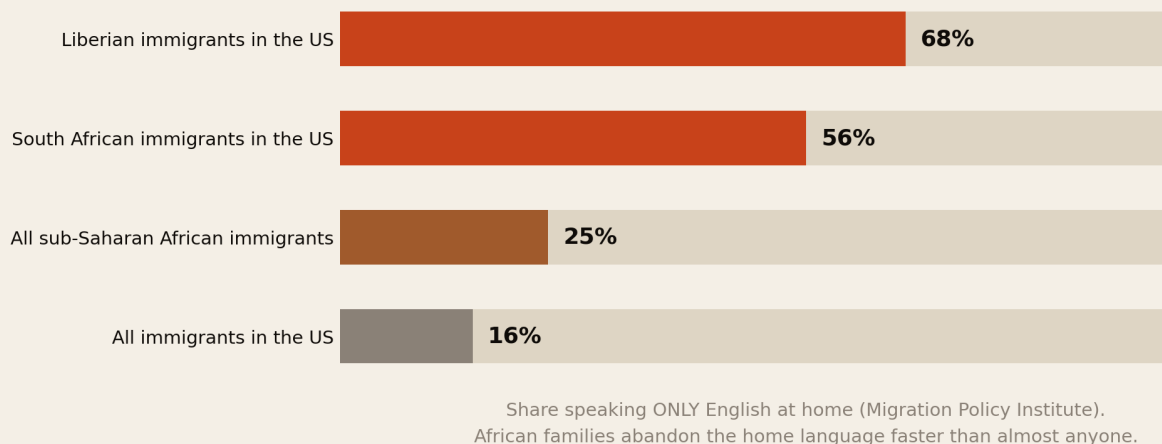


Fig 2 — Share of immigrants speaking only English at home, from Migration Policy Institute analysis of US Census data.

Here is the finding this report exists for. You would expect a diaspora as proudly cultural as Africa's to hold its languages at least as well as other groups. The census data says the opposite.

A quarter of sub-Saharan African immigrants in the US speak only English at home, against 16% of all immigrants. Where English is an official language of the origin country, the numbers jump: **68% of Liberian** and **56% of South African** immigrants keep no other language in the house at all. Note what this measures — not the children's ability, but *the first generation's own choice of home language*. For many African families the three-generation clock starts a generation early, because generation one has already switched.

The mechanism is colonial history doing quiet work. In most of anglophone Africa, English was already the language of school, exams, offices and status *before anyone emigrated*. Parents were educated in it, succeeded through it, and often associate the home language with the village and English with advancement. Emigration did not introduce that hierarchy. It just removed the last environments where the home language was necessary.

Other diasporas must learn the new country's language. African families often arrive already fluent in it — a huge advantage for the parents' careers, and quietly fatal for the grandmother's conversations.

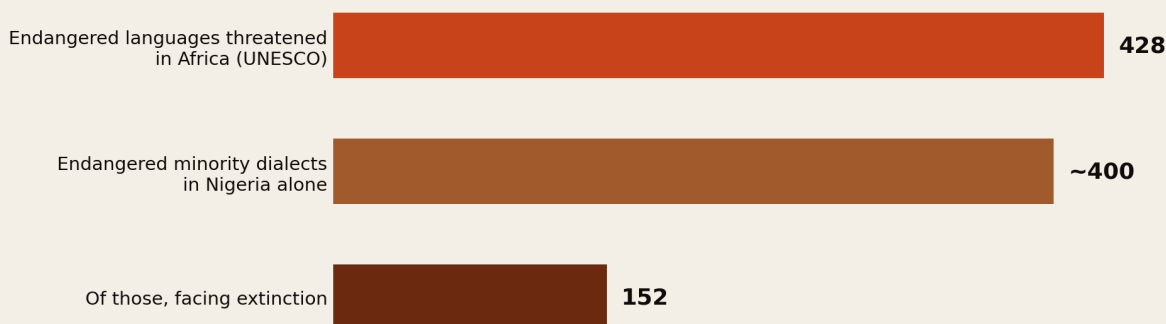
04 · Where the Shift Actually Happens

The folklore says the third generation loses the language. The research is more precise, and more useful: **the third generation is where the loss becomes visible. The shift itself happens in the second — and inside the first generation's own home.**

- **The gap is production, not comprehension.** In a UK study of second-generation South Asian children — the closest well-measured comparator — most understood their heritage language, yet **fewer than a third spoke it with their own siblings.** A child who understands but always answers in English is not bilingual. They are a fluent listener in a language they will not pass on.
- **Parents drive it, meaning well.** Research on immigrant families repeatedly finds parents switching to English with their children out of concern for school success — despite the evidence that the home language does not hold children back.
- **Siblings finish it.** Once children speak English to each other, the heritage language loses its last daily arena. Studies of African immigrant households find a child's English dominance rises with the number of other English-proficient children in the house.

The practical conclusion is sharp: **by the time a family notices the loss — usually when a grandparent visits — the decisive years are already behind them.** The window is early childhood, and the lever is not whether children *hear* the language but whether they are required to *produce* it.

05 · Not Safe at Home Either



The languages are not safe at home either. UNESCO classifies Igbo as threatened — with roughly 20 million speakers.

Fig 3 — Language endangerment on the continent. UNESCO figures and Nigerian linguistic surveys; counts of this kind vary by methodology.

UNESCO counts roughly **428 threatened languages in Africa** and warns that up to 10% of the continent's languages may vanish within a century. In Nigeria alone, around **400 minority dialects are considered endangered, 152 of them facing extinction.** And the headline case: **UNESCO classifies Igbo as endangered** — a language with roughly **20 million speakers** — because in urban Nigeria, English-medium schooling and status economics mean many Igbo children can no longer hold a conversation in it. The same force operating in Peckham operates in Lagos and Enugu.

This changes what the diaspora's choice means. For the big languages — Swahili, Hausa, Amharic — the homeland reservoir may hold. For hundreds of others, **the diaspora is not losing its copy of something safely archived. It is losing one of the last copies.**

06 · What Is Actually Lost

What does not survive translation — a language is a set of ideas, not a set of labels

kunya

Hausa

shame — and modesty, restraint, propriety before elders. A virtue, not only a wound.

ubuntu

Nguni languages

“I am because we are” — personhood as something granted by community.

sankofa

Twi

“go back and get it” — retrieving what was left behind in order to move forward.

ìbílẹ̀

Yoruba

of-the-homeland — the quality of being rooted; what the diaspora child is losing.

Fig 4 — A language is a set of ideas, not a set of labels. Glosses are simplified — each of these words carries more than one line can hold.

- **The grandparent relationship.** Where the grandparents' English is limited, the language is the relationship — and the child who loses one loses the other. No later app course restores a childhood of conversations that did not happen.
- **Concepts with no English container.** Our report on shame turned on exactly this: Hausa *kunya* names both a sanction and a virtue, and the English word “shame” cannot carry that. A child raised only in English does not just lack the word — they lack easy access to the idea.
- **The oral archive.** Proverbs, praise names, the grandmother's stories, the jokes that only land in the original. African cultures carried disproportionate amounts of their knowledge orally; each generation that cannot listen is a wing of the archive closing.
- **Standing in the homeland.** The diaspora child who returns without the language is legible to everyone as a visitor — including to themselves.

07 · The Cognitive Question

REASONABLY WELL SUPPORTED

- Bilingual children outperform monolinguals on executive-function tasks more often than chance (quantitative synthesis)
- Advantages appear on inhibition and cognitive-flexibility tasks
- No evidence that a second home language harms school English

GENUINELY CONTESTED

- The advantage disappears on working-memory measures in several studies
- Some recent studies find null or mixed effects once background is controlled
- Socioeconomic status may explain part of what looked like bilingual advantage

Fig 5 — The state of the bilingual-advantage evidence, honestly divided.

What holds up: a quantitative synthesis finds bilingual children outperform monolinguals on executive-function tasks **far more often than chance**, with the clearest effects on inhibition and cognitive flexibility. And the fear that drives the switch — that the home language will hold a child back in English — finds no support.

What is contested: several studies find the advantage vanishes on working-memory measures; recent work reports null or mixed effects; and socioeconomic status confounds some of the classic results. The honest reading is that the cognitive bonus is **real but modest and inconsistent** — a tailwind, not a superpower.

Which is fine, because the case never rested on IQ points. The strongest facts are simpler: the second language costs a child nothing academically, and it buys a grandmother.

08 · The Regret Market



The demand signal: adults queuing to learn what childhood homes stopped teaching. Third bar not to scale — it counts courses, not people.

Fig 6 — Adults queuing to learn what childhood homes stopped teaching. Duolingo learner counts as reported; Nkenne's course list from the company.

Over 477,000 people are learning Swahili on Duolingo, and over 30,000 are learning Zulu. Nkenne — an app built explicitly for the diaspora — teaches nine African languages, including Igbo, Yoruba, Twi, Hausa, Somali and Amharic. A market has formed around adult heritage learners: people in their twenties and thirties buying back, at app speed and subscription prices, what their households once had for free.

Two readings, both true. The optimistic one: demand exists, tools exist, and revival is a real movement. The sober one: **the demand arrives one generation after the supply was cut**, and an app can deliver vocabulary but not the accent, the idiom, or the years of dinner-table repetition. The regret market is real precisely because the cheap window closed.

09 · Why African Languages Get No Help

Five reasons the shift is faster for African families

- 1 English is already the home's prestige language**
 Colonial schooling made English the language of exams, jobs and status before anyone emigrated. The hierarchy travelled with the family.
- 2 Parents optimise for the child's success**
 Speaking English to children feels like helping them. The home language is quietly reclassified as a luxury.
- 3 No institutional back-up**
 Greek, Polish, Chinese and Tamil communities run Saturday schools at scale. African languages mostly have no equivalent infrastructure.
- 4 The community is split by language**
 A city's 'Nigerian community' speaks Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa and more — too few families per language to sustain a school.
- 5 The audience judges the accent**
 Children mocked — at home or 'back home' — for speaking it badly conclude it is safer not to speak it at all.

Fig 7 — The mechanism, assembled from the transmission literature and community accounts.

The deepest is the first: **the prestige hierarchy predates migration**. A Polish family in Chicago never regarded Polish as the low-status language of their own home. Many African families, schooled under systems where speaking the mother tongue in class was punished, did — and carried that ranking abroad intact.

The most fixable is the third: **infrastructure**. Greek, Chinese, Polish and Tamil communities built Saturday-school systems that industrialise transmission. African languages largely lack the equivalent, partly because of the fourth problem: a “Nigerian community” of ten thousand people is a Yoruba community, an Igbo community, a Hausa community and a dozen smaller ones, none individually large enough to staff a school.

And the fifth reason is our shame research wearing a smaller coat: the child who attempts the language and gets laughed at learns that *attempting it badly is more shameful than not attempting it*. A system that punishes visible imperfection produces silence here exactly as it produces silence in clinics.

10 · What Actually Works

What the evidence and the successful families point at

01 A home language policy, stated out loud

The evidence says shift happens by drift, not decision. Families that decide — “we speak Yoruba at dinner” — are the ones with speaking grandchildren.

02 Grandparents as immersion

The strongest natural teacher available: motivated, patient, and often monolingual — which forces the child to produce, not just understand.

03 Speaking beats understanding

The documented gap is production. A child answered in English learns to understand; a child required to reply learns to speak.

04 Media, music and calls in the language

Nollywood, Afrobeats lyrics, voice notes to aunts — free immersion the diaspora already owns.

05 Community schools, even tiny ones

Two families and a WhatsApp group beat zero. Other diasporas built Saturday schools; nothing stops African communities doing the same.

Fig 8 — The practices that recur among families who kept the language. Evidence-informed, not clinically tested.

The research on families that beat the three-generation rule converges on something almost annoyingly simple: **they replaced drift with policy**. Say the rule out loud. Deploy the grandparents — a monolingual grandparent is the best language teacher a family will ever have, and video calls make this free across continents. Require production, not just exposure: when the child answers in English, the parent replies — kindly, boringly, forever — in the language. Use the media the diaspora already owns. And build tiny institutions: a Saturday class needs two families, one fluent adult and a room.

Note what is absent from the list: money. Every item is free or nearly so. The binding constraint is not resources. It is the daily willingness to be the slightly awkward household that answers English questions in Yoruba.

11 · If You Are Raising Children Abroad

- **Start before it feels necessary.** The decisive window is early childhood, and the loss is invisible until a grandparent visit reveals it. If your child answers you in English today, the clock is already running.

- **Do not fear for their English.** Their English is guaranteed by the entire society around them. You are the only supplier of the other language they will ever have.
- **Protect the attempt.** The accent will be imperfect and the grammar will wobble. The child who is laughed at stops. One firm sentence to the laughing auntie is worth a year of lessons.
- **Understanding is not the goal — speaking is.** A house where children understand but answer in English feels bilingual and is one generation from silence.
- **If the language is small, write things down.** Record the grandparents — stories, proverbs, names, songs. A phone and an afternoon creates an archive that will otherwise not exist.
- **And if you are second-generation and it is already gone:** partial recovery — enough for the phone calls, enough for the visit — is a realistic goal. Fluency-or-nothing is the perfectionism that caused the problem.

12 · The Uncomfortable Part

First, the parents who switched were not careless. They were often obeying the explicit advice of teachers and doctors, in decades when professionals wrongly told immigrant families that two languages would confuse a child. Others were protecting children from playground racism aimed at the accent. The generation that lost the language was, in most cases, trying to give its children the country. Blame is not just unkind here; it is inaccurate.

Second, the economics are genuinely against the language. This library documents, report after report, that English is what the global economy pays for. A parent who prioritises English is reading the incentives correctly. The case for the home language is not economic and should not pretend to be. It is about who the child gets to be, and who they get to talk to.

Third, the child gets a vote. Some second-generation adults do not mourn the language, and resent the suggestion that they are incomplete without it. Heritage is an inheritance, not an obligation — and a report like this walks close to the same “what will people say” machinery we criticised elsewhere. The honest position: the loss is real, the grief many feel is real, and so is the right to feel neither.

The window closes quietly, and it closes early. Whatever a family decides, it should be a decision — because the default has already been decided, and it is silence in three generations.

13 · Method & Limits

This report assembles published research as at 19 August 2026 on heritage language shift, applied to Africans abroad.

- **Fig 1's bar heights are illustrative.** The three-generation pattern is robustly documented; the specific proportions surviving at each stage vary by group and study, and we have deliberately not invented precise numbers for them.
- **The “fewer than a third speak it with siblings” figure is from second-generation South Asian children in the UK,** used as the best-measured comparator. No equivalent large study of African-language transmission in the diaspora exists — which is itself a finding. Treat the number as indicative of the second-generation pattern, not as a measurement of African families.
- **The English-only-at-home figures measure household language use, not children's ability,** and they aggregate wildly different situations — a Liberian family for whom English genuinely is the mother tongue is counted alongside a Yoruba family that switched. The 25% average still sits far above the all-immigrant 16%.
- **Endangerment counts vary by source and method.** UNESCO's ~428, Nigeria's ~400 dialects and the 152 facing extinction come from different exercises with different definitions. Use them as orders of magnitude. The Igbo classification is UNESCO's and is contested by some Nigerian linguists.
- **The bilingual-advantage literature is presented divided because it is divided.** We have shown the contested column at the same size as the supported one deliberately.
- **Section 10 is evidence-informed, not trial-tested.** The practices come from the transmission literature and documented family strategies; no randomised study proves any specific bundle.
- **The four words in Fig 4 are simplified glosses** by non-speakers relying on published discussions. Speakers of these languages will have corrections — which we would genuinely welcome.
- **Duolingo learner counts** are platform-reported totals of course enrolments, not active or diaspora-specific learners.

Principal sources

Alba et al., Demography, on the three-generation pattern; Migration Policy Institute on home language use among sub-Saharan African immigrants; research on household context and English proficiency among children of African immigrants; University of Alberta and the International Journal of Bilingualism on second-generation speaking patterns; UNESCO endangerment figures and research on Igbo endangerment; quantitative synthesis of bilingual executive-function research and the PRISMA systematic review; Duolingo and reporting on African language courses; Nkenne's published course list. Full inline links in the web edition.

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