

# SOCIOLINGUISTIC DISCOURSE AND COURSE SELECTION AMONG GEN Z STUDENTS IN NIGERIAN HIGHER INSTITUTIONS: IS IDEOLOGY DRIVING ENROLLMENT DECLINE IN ENGLISH AND LITERARY STUDIES?

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**Abstract:** This study examined sociolinguistic discourses and their influence on course selection among Gen Z students in Nigerian higher institutions, with particular attention to whether ideology is driving the decline in enrollment in English and Literary Studies. Anchored in Language Ideology Theory propounded by Michael Silverstein, the study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised all first year students of Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu, during the 2025/2026 academic session, while the major population was drawn from the Faculties of Management and Social Sciences and Law. Using stratified random sampling with equal allocation, a sample of eighty students was selected. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire validated by experts and analysed using mean and standard deviation, with a cut off mean score of 2.50 for decision making. Findings revealed that dominant sociolinguistic ideologies frame English and Literary Studies as less prestigious, less practical, and economically unrewarding when compared to other disciplines. Language ideology significantly influenced students' course choices, as societal expectations and perceived employability outweighed personal interest. Digital culture further shaped academic identity by promoting informal language practices and alternative career pathways that reduce interest in traditional literary disciplines. The study concludes that enrollment decline is largely ideological, reinforced by utilitarian narratives and digital discourse, rather than by outright rejection of the discipline.

**Keywords:** Sociolinguistic ideology, course selection, Gen Z students, digital culture, English and Literary Studies

## Introduction

Course selection in higher education is influenced by a complex interaction of social, cultural, institutional, and personal factors that shape students' academic trajectories. In Nigerian higher institutions, increasing attention has been drawn to changing patterns in students' course preferences, particularly among Generation Z students who now

constitute a significant proportion of the undergraduate population. Observations within academic and policy discussions suggest variations in enrolment across disciplines, including those within the humanities, although the extent and causes of these patterns remain underexplored. English and Literary Studies, a long established field within Nigerian universities, has featured in such

discussions, raising questions about how students currently perceive language based disciplines. Examining these perceptions is necessary before drawing conclusions about motivation, decline, or causality. This study is therefore situated within an exploratory context that seeks to understand the factors shaping Gen Z students' academic choices.

Sociolinguistics, defined as the study of the relationship between language and society, offers a productive framework for analysing how beliefs about language influence social behaviour, institutional practices, and educational decision making. Language ideologies, understood as shared systems of beliefs about language and its users that assign value, legitimacy, and meaning to linguistic forms, shape how linguistic practices and language related disciplines are evaluated. Aboh (2024) demonstrates that language attitudes in Nigerian university settings, referring to evaluative responses toward language varieties and their speakers, are closely tied to social evaluation, stereotypes, and ideological positioning, all of which affect perceptions of academic legitimacy. These beliefs influence how students interpret linguistic competence, meaning perceived proficiency and appropriateness of language use, prestige, referring to socially recognised symbolic value, and relevance, understood as perceived usefulness or applicability. When certain language practices are associated with intelligence, professionalism, or upward mobility, they are ideologically elevated, while disciplines concerned with language analysis and literary interpretation may be viewed less favourably. Adeniyi (2023) further observes that contemporary linguistic and educational thought increasingly emphasises pragmatism and relevance, reflecting

broader societal expectations placed on education. Within this ideological environment, English is widely regarded as indispensable for academic success, yet its study as a specialised discipline is often questioned, revealing a tension between language as a communicative tool and language as an object of scholarly inquiry.

Digital culture, defined as patterns of communication, identity formation, and meaning making shaped by digital technologies and online platforms, plays a central role in shaping Gen Z students' linguistic identities and academic orientations, intensifying these ideological tensions. Social media platforms serve as key spaces for linguistic innovation, understood as creative modification of language forms, self representation, referring to how individuals present identity through language, and peer validation. Olonade (2023) documents how Gen Z users creatively manipulate English in digital spaces, producing forms that challenge conventional grammatical and stylistic norms. While such practices demonstrate linguistic competence and adaptability, they often remain disconnected from institutional academic expectations, meaning the formal norms upheld within universities. This perceived disconnect can reinforce the impression that English and Literary Studies do not fully engage with contemporary linguistic realities. At the same time, the ideology of usefulness, defined as the belief that academic disciplines should yield direct economic or career benefits, has become central to Gen Z educational decision making. Ilori (2023) shows that students' imagined communities and future aspirations significantly influence how language learning is valued. When English is imagined primarily as a

gateway to other disciplines rather than as a discipline in its own right, its academic study may appear redundant. In a labour market marked by uncertainty, such ideological framings strongly influence course selection.

The tension between prestige and practicality further shapes students' enrolment decisions. Prestige, understood as symbolic and institutional status, and practicality, defined as perceived employability and career relevance, operate as competing value systems. Although English retains institutional prestige as Nigeria's official language and medium of instruction, this symbolic status does not always translate into confidence in its career value. Adigun (2023) argues that sociolinguistic beliefs held by teachers and institutions significantly influence educational outcomes and students' academic motivation, particularly when institutional messaging prioritises market driven outcomes. Education policy, referring to formal governmental and institutional directives guiding curriculum and funding priorities, also reinforces these hierarchies. Nowakowski (2023) demonstrates that beliefs about English ownership and educational models influence academic preferences in postcolonial contexts, while Covele (2025) shows that English is often promoted for career development even as humanities oriented language programmes receive limited support. Within digitally mediated educational spaces, Gen Z students further negotiate academic identity, defined as students' sense of belonging and identification with a discipline, through flexibility and hybridity, sometimes at odds with traditional disciplinary boundaries, as shown by Ziden and Ifedayo (2024). Isbell and Crowther (2023) similarly note that beliefs about language varieties and legitimacy shape

academic attitudes across generations, with Gen Z increasingly influenced by global digital discourse. Karim et al. (2023) conclude that language ideology plays a decisive role in enrolment decisions where English is framed either as a tool for professional mobility or as an abstract academic pursuit. It is within this intersection of sociolinguistics, education, and digital culture that this study examines whether ideological narratives surrounding language, usefulness, prestige, and academic identity are influencing course selection among Gen Z students in Nigerian higher institutions, particularly in relation to English and Literary Studies.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To identify the sociolinguistic ideologies influencing Gen Z students' perceptions of English and Literary Studies in Nigerian higher institutions.
2. To examine the influence of language ideology on course selection among Gen Z students in Nigerian higher institutions.
3. To investigate the role of digital culture in Gen Z students' enrolment decisions in English and Literary Studies in Nigerian higher institutions.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the sociolinguistic ideologies that influence Gen Z students' perceptions of English and Literary Studies in Nigerian higher institutions?
2. How does language ideology influence course selection among Gen Z students in Nigerian higher institutions?
3. What role does digital culture play in Gen Z students' enrolment decisions in English and Literary Studies in Nigerian higher institutions?

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Language Ideology Theory**

The paper is based on the Language Ideology Theory which is one of the key theories of sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. The theory has been propounded by Michael Silverstein whose seminal work made language ideology a powerful tool of analysing the relationship between language and social meaning as well as power. In the formulation, Silverstein takes language as not just a neutral system of communication but as a socially situated practice that is framed by culturally particular belief systems (Silverstein, 1979).

The Theory of Language ideology illustrates the way social beliefs pertaining to language shape social behaviour, institutional norms, and judgment. Linguistic ideologies, according to Silverstein, are assumptions concerning how language is, how it is supposed to be used, and who has the right to use language in certain ways, and are transmitted socially. Such assumptions relate the linguistic forms to the values of intelligence, authority, morality, and economic value hence forming the way the language practices and disciplines, related to language, are evaluated in society (Silverstein 1979).

Later research has improved and enlarged this theory. Paul Kroskrity theorises the ideologies of language as competing and multiple belief systems which represent power relations and social positioning. In this respect, language ideologies do not spread evenly within a society but are uneven across groups, institutions, and generations, and determine the interpretation of language competence and legitimacy (Kroskrity 2004). This observation is especially applicable to the student populations in higher education, which are influenced by

ideological differences to influence academic orientation.

Most recent theoretical literature also highlights the sociocognitive aspect of language ideology. According to Munch (2025), language ideologies are interpretive systems that allow people to understand the linguistic actions and their social implications. These structures are acquired in the process of education, media, and popular discussion where they are naturalised with time. Consequently, the students can internalize domineering ideological discourses concerning the usefulness or prestige of specific language practices without critically reviewing them. Language Ideology Theory has also been utilized in discourse studies in order to describe how institutional communication incorporates ideological meanings. As Maeattala (2022) demonstrates, language ideologies organize the discourse through determining what is acceptable as legitimate knowledge and even acceptable modes of expression. When applied in the education sector, these ideologies affect priorities in curriculum, disciplinary hierarchy, and the perceived academic value by students.

Language ideologies are also explained through the theory in the way language influences education and identity construction. As shown by Thompson (2022), the language beliefs have an important impact on the teaching orientations and self-concept of the learner especially in the multilingual and postcolonial context. These attitudes influence the degree of self-judgment of the students in terms of their linguistic proficiency and the attitude that they have in relation to language-based disciplines in the academic sphere.

The current trends in semiotics increase the applicability of the theory even more. Leone (2024) puts language ideology into a productive context of semiotic ideology, stating that the meaning-making practices will always be ideologically situated. This view is an indication of how academic disciplines themselves are semiotically represented as either functional or abstract, based on their status quo ideological discourses.

In the policy and the general discourse, educational priorities are also influenced by language ideology. According to Graan (2022), the views of language as historically situated have an effect on the manner in which institutions establish relevance and societal value. These notions have the tendency to glorify instrumental applications of language and devalue academic applications of language as an object of study.

Language ideologies are constantly resettled in digitally mediated interactions. Bednarek (2025) describes how ideological considerations of language legitimacy spread on digital platforms, shaping the concept of correctness and authority. Such dynamics primarily play an important role in younger generations, the identities of which are formed at the edges of digital culture and institutional demands.

Through the application of the Language Ideology Theory, this paper aims to offer a more linguistic approach to the explanation of how the choice of course by Gen Z students could be influenced by an ideologically constructed language. The theory provides a strong structure for exploring the possibility of enrolment patterns in English and Literary Studies being shaped by beliefs on

usefulness, prestige, and legitimacy, as opposed to the intellectual content of the discipline itself.

### **Review of Empirical Studies**

Several related empirical studies have been reviewed in order to determine their relevance and relationships with the current research on sociolinguistic discourse and course choice among Gen Z students in Nigerian higher learning institutions.

Li et al. (2025) examined the language ideologies of the stakeholders and the movement of the multilingual children to use monolingual English in the educational settings. The paper focused on the role of institutional expectations, parents' beliefs, and societal attitudes towards English in determining the linguistic careers of students. Qualitative research design was used to collect data in the form of interviews and classroom observations with teachers, parents, and students. The results indicated that English was always placed as an academic achievement and social mobility and the other languages were isolated ideologically. This monolingualism orientation affected the learning identities of learners and their future educational goals. As compared to the current research, the two studies focus on the aspect of language ideology in determining educational decision-making and perceptions. Nevertheless, unlike Li et al. (2025), who consider contexts of multilingual children and the school setting as the research area, the current study will focus on Gen Z undergraduates residing in higher institutions across Nigeria and discuss the way in which these ideologies shape course selection in the English and Literary Studies.

Karim et al. (2023) studied the language ideology, English proficiency acquisition, and performance in

professional communication among the graduates of the English-medium universities. The researchers used a mixed-methods design to gather survey information and interview feedback from the STEM and business graduates. The results showed that the beliefs that students had regarding using the English language as a means to gain professional mobility had a significant impact on their preference to take up English- medium programmes as opposed to language-based disciplines. English was appreciated in a practical way and not an intellectual one and the usage of programmes was favored based on their perceived economic benefit. The given research has much in common with Karim et al. (2023) since it also emphasizes the instrumental ideology of English and its impact on academic decisions. The distinction is in the scope and objectives: Karim et al. (2023) explored the results of graduates in professional programmes, and the present study deals with the choice of enrolment of Gen Z students and their attitude to English and Literary Studies in Nigerian higher education institutions.

Zitha (2023) has carried out a case study of register competence in academic writing in the University of Venda among third-level students of English. Based on textual analysis and interviews, the study examined the role that sociolinguistic awareness and academic register competence played in motivating students to study English. Results indicated that the students tended to be unable to balance daily language practices with the academic demands, which resulted in insecurity and non-participation. Like in the current study, Zitha (2023) drew attention to the mismatch between the linguistic identity and the academic norms of students. Nevertheless, where Zitha examined the linguistic competence in English

programmes, the current study builds on the argument by examining how such perceptions impact the enrolment choice and the waning enthusiasm for learning English and Literary Studies among Gen Z learners.

Wahyudi and Ishlahiyah (2025) also investigated the choice of dominant English and World Englishes by students and lecturers in the context of higher education. Based on survey questionnaires and interviews, it was found that the academic preferences and linguistic legitimacy perceptions of students depended on their exposure to global varieties of English. It was discovered that Gen Z students prefer more flexible and global forms of the English language to traditional academic models. This conclusion can be attributed to the fact that the current work is focused on the digital culture and changing linguistic identities. The most important distinction is that Wahyudi and Ishlahiyah (2025) are interested in the aspect of language variety preference, whereas the current research addresses the impact of these preferences on course choice and enrolment in English and Literary Studies.

Catchpole (2022) discussed the drop in A-Level studies in English Literature in the United Kingdom. In semi-structured interviews with students willing to read but not to study English Literature, the research discovered that career goals, views on subjectivity, and employability determined the choice of students. Students felt that they could read on their own without the need to study literature. The current research has conceptual similarity with Catchpole (2022) in exploring the perception of English and literature as valuable academically but professionally restrictive. Nevertheless, the study by Catchpole is placed in the UK pre-university setting,

whereas the current research is based on explaining higher institutions in Nigeria and includes the sociolinguistic ideology and digital culture as independent variables.

Heller (2023) presented a data-driven, yet journalistic account of the falling enrolments in the English major in American universities. Based on institutional documents and student accounts, the article has brought out the role played by economic anxiety, market-oriented education, and the ideological changes in abandoning the humanities in enrolment decline. Even though it is not an academic empirical research, the work provided by Heller is contextually informative, which correlates with the current study, the issue of ideology and perceived usefulness. The distinction is methodological rigor and locality: the current study gives a sociolinguistic and empirical scholarly approach to the study of Nigeria, whereas the work by Heller is based on the United States and utilizes the narrative analysis.

Overall, the reviewed articles prove that the ideology of language, the perception of usefulness, institutional messages, and the changes in linguistic identities could be used as the key factors that impact educational decisions in various situations. An evident trend is developing where English is considered to be of instrumental and economic value, and language and literary studies are less practical. Nonetheless, the research papers are different in terms of geographical scope, level of education, and research methodology. The current work has a unique contribution in placing these problems in the Nigerian higher institutions and directly correlating sociolinguistic discourse, digital culture, and course choice among Gen Z students. In such a way, it fills a contextual and theoretical gap in the current

research and offers a specific analysis of ideology as a possible factor that contributed to enrolment decline in English and Literary Studies.

### **Methodology**

The research design employed in the study was a descriptive survey study to examine sociolinguistic research and course choice among Gen Z students in higher institutions of Nigeria. The design was deemed suitable since it allowed the researcher to receive in a systematic manner quantitative data on the opinions, beliefs, and attitudes of students about the issue of language ideology, digital culture, and enrolment choices. It also gave the opportunity to study patterns across groups in a natural academic environment without controlling the variables in the survey design. In this manner, the perceptions of the students towards English and Literary Studies would be present in the real institutional contexts. This design hence gave a credible foundation on how ideology can contribute to the choice of course among first-year undergraduates.

All the first-year students of Godfrey Okoye University at Enugu in the 2025/2026 academic session made up the population of the study and the total population was four hundred and eighty-three students (483) in eight faculties. Nevertheless, the available population was restricted to first-year students in the Faculty of Management and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Law, which comprised a combination of two hundred (200) students. The Faculty of Management and Social Sciences consisted of one hundred and forty-eight (148) students and the Faculty of Law had fifty-two (52) students. The selection of these two faculties is because they are related to the use of language, discourse practices, and humanities oriented

approach to academic activity, which is within the scope of the study.

The study sample comprised eighty (80) respondents. The sample was forty (40) students of the Faculty of Management and Social Sciences and another forty (40) students of the Faculty of Law. The stratified sampling was used with an equal distribution to justify the sample size. Even though the number of the faculties varied, equal distribution was also used to make the representation equal and to be able to compare the responses in the two faculties meaningfully. The method is suitable for attitudinal and perception studies whose research goal is a subgroup comparison. The stratified random sampling method was adopted, with the faculties forming a stratum, simple random sampling was used to identify respondents in each of the stratifications.

The data collection tool was an instrument in the form of a structured questionnaire that was developed by the researcher. There were three sections of the questionnaire according to the aims of the research. Section A entailed sociolinguistic ideologies and the perception of students towards English and Literary Studies. Section B dealt with the ideology of languages and the choice of courses. Section C looked at how the digital culture affects enrolment decisions. Each of the items was arranged on four point Likert scale Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1), which allowed respondents to present a definite response to each statement.

The instrument was subjected to face and content validation. Three experts in linguistics, education,

and measurement and evaluation examined the questionnaire to ensure clarity, relevance, and adequacy of coverage of the study variables. Their suggestions were incorporated into the final version of the instrument, thereby ensuring that it measured what it was intended to measure. To establish the reliability of the instrument, a pilot test was conducted using ten first year students from a faculty not included in the study. The data obtained were analysed using Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.82, indicating a high level of internal consistency.

Data collected through the questionnaire were analysed using mean and standard deviation. A cut off mean score of 2.50 was adopted for decision making. Any item with a mean score of 2.50 and above was accepted, while any item with a mean score below 2.50 was rejected. The statistical analyses were carried out using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.0 to ensure accuracy and clarity in data presentation.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed in the conduct of the study. Permission was obtained from the relevant faculty authorities before administering the questionnaires. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were adequately informed about the purpose of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity of responses were assured, and no personal identifying information was collected. Respondents were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. These measures ensured that the study was conducted in line with accepted ethical standards in educational research.

## Results

**Table 1: Responses to Research Question 1**

RQ1: What sociolinguistic ideologies influence Gen Z students' perceptions of English and Literary Studies in Nigerian higher institutions?

ITEM	MEAN	SD	DECISION
English and Literary Studies are perceived as less prestigious than science based courses.	2.71	0.66	Accepted
Studying English is associated with limited career opportunities.	2.68	0.72	Accepted
English and Literary Studies are viewed mainly as theoretical rather than practical.	2.62	0.69	Accepted
Language proficiency is considered less important than technical skills.	2.54	0.75	Accepted
English and Literary Studies are associated with low social status.	2.41	0.81	Rejected

**Table 2: Responses to Research Question 2**

RQ2: How does language ideology influence course selection among Gen Z students in Nigerian higher institutions?

ITEM	MEAN	SD	DECISION
Students prefer courses perceived as economically rewarding.	2.83	0.58	Accepted
Parental and societal expectations influence students' course choices.	2.76	0.63	Accepted
Language related courses are avoided due to perceived lack of employability.	2.69	0.70	Accepted
Students believe English skills can be acquired without studying the course.	2.61	0.74	Accepted
Personal interest outweighs societal ideology in course selection.	2.48	0.79	Rejected

**Table 3: Responses to Research Question 3**

RQ3: What role does digital culture play in Gen Z students' enrolment decisions in English and Literary Studies in Nigerian higher institutions?

ITEM	MEAN	SD	DECISION
Social media promotes alternative career paths outside formal education.	2.77	0.65	Accepted
Digital slang and informal language reduce interest in academic English.	2.63	0.71	Accepted
Online influencers shape students' perception of "useful" courses.	2.72	0.60	Accepted
Digital platforms make self learning more attractive than degree programmes.	2.58	0.76	Accepted
Digital culture encourages enrolment in English and Literary Studies.	2.36	0.82	Rejected

### **Discussion of Findings**

According to the results of Table 1, the perception of English and Literary Studies by Gen Z students is influenced by mainstream sociolinguistic ideology, and not by the open aggression toward the field. It was also found that the respondents thought that English and Literary Studies are seen as less prestigious when compared to science-oriented courses (Mean = 2.71) and are usually considered theoretical and have little practical use (Mean = 2.62). The prevalence of the perception that the level of language skills is less significant than the level of technical skills (Mean = 2.54) may be taken to imply a utilitarian ideology of higher education. Nevertheless, the fact that the concept that English and Literary Studies are related to low social status was rejected (Mean = 2.41) means that the subject is not so much stigmatized as it is just devalued in present academic value systems.

As Table 2 has demonstrated, language ideology is a key factor influencing the choice of the course in Gen Z students. The respondents had a high agreement that courses which are seen to be economically rewarding (Mean = 2.83) are favored and that the societal and parental expectations play a role in the decision of students to take up a course (Mean = 2.76). It is also brought out by the perception that English can be learned in non-university settings (Mean = 2.61), which leads to deteriorating enrolment as students do not feel the need to learn English formally. The dismissal of the fact that personal interest is dominant over the societal ideology (Mean = 2.48) shows that other structural and ideological forces play more significant roles in the choice of courses than the passion of an individual.

The results of Table 3 indicate that digital culture is a significant factor that determines the academic identity and enrolment decisions of students. The participants concurred that social media fosters other career paths beyond formal education (Mean = 2.77) and the use of digital slang and informal language lifestyles diminishes the desire to use academic English (Mean = 2.63). Superimposition of digital discourse on success and relevance can be seen through the role of online personalities in determining the perception of good courses to take (Mean = 2.72). The fact that the item in question predicting the positive association with enrolment in the English and Literary Studies was rejected (Mean = 2.36) indicates that digital space is more inclined to reduce the traditional literary areas of study rather than enhance them.

### **Conclusion**

The paper concluded that sociolinguistic ideologies of economic utility, technical skills, and digital relevance are responsible for decreasing enrolment in English and Literary Studies among Gen Z students. Although the field cannot be perceived as socially inferior, it is considered less useful in the modern accounts of success. The ideology of language, supported through social norms and the digital culture, has a prominent impact on the choice of course. Digital platforms also upset the academic identity by facilitating the use of informal language and other kinds of career models that challenge the traditional humanities disciplines.

### **Educational Implications**

1. English and Literary Studies curricula should be repositioned to demonstrate clear links to contemporary career pathways and digital communication.

2. Educational policymakers should address the dominance of utilitarian ideologies that marginalize humanities disciplines.

3. Institutions should integrate digital discourse analysis and media literacy into English programmes to align with Gen Z realities.

4. Universities need to actively reshape narratives around the value of literary studies in a digital economy.

5. Improved career counselling can help students understand the transferable skills embedded in language based disciplines.

#### **Recommendations**

1. University administrators should redesign English and Literary Studies programmes to

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foreground employable and digital communication skills.

2. Departments should actively counter negative ideologies through orientation programmes and career showcases.

3. Educational policymakers should promote balanced valuation of humanities and science disciplines in higher education policy.

4. Lecturers should incorporate digital culture and new media texts into teaching to enhance relevance.

5. Universities should strengthen career guidance units to clarify the professional opportunities associated with English and Literary Studies.

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