
MULTILINGUALISM AND THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE QUESTION

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Abstract

We do have nations being described as multilingual, if more than two languages are the official languages, as in Switzerland. In the Ex-colonies, the problem of multilingualism is a little different because of the diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds of the people. The imposed languages serving as unifying forces are not the languages of any one group in the nation. Sequentially, two problems are created in the National Language question. The first is the importation of English into the country, as in Nigeria, as far back as the 15th century; and Lord Lugard's amalgamation of the Southern and Northern protectorates in 1914. Along with this foreign language came its foreign culture. The English Language does not at all qualify as the Nigerian National Language. Secondly, the government incapacitated itself by giving official recognition to only three out of 521 languages (Oyetayo, 2006) and using the derogatory term "MAJOR", meaning that all the other, over 518 languages are "MINOR" languages. A titanic criticism on the government is that totalitarian posture, posing instability to the corporate unity of the nation. There is no categorical statement for an indigenous language, taking over from English. Any proposal that does not take into cognizance the multilingual nature of the country is not likely to succeed. To solve this, we propose that the language spoken by the smallest (micro) population in the country be selected. This should be allowed to develop from within, then expand to some other languages in the form of borrowing, as borrowing is a normal consequence of the natural contact of language in multilingual societies.

Key Words: Multilingual, English, Indigenous language, borrowing

Introduction

People can have competence in more than two languages at various levels and they are described as multilingual. We do have nations also that are described as multilingual, if more than two languages are the official languages, Switzerland, where French, German and Italian are spoken. In the ex-colonies, the problem of multilingualism is a little different, given the diverse ethnolinguistic background of the people. Whatever languages serve as unifying forces, are not the languages of any one group in the nation. Even here, there have been, and always will be, moves to choose local national languages, however daunting this task may be.

We may classify countries like Nigeria and other Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone countries as multilingual where a cyclic process of acquiring two languages gets into motion fairly early. There are

different mother tongues in these areas which enable the people to maintain a social system peculiar to them, while at the same time requiring the second language not only to socialise, but also to communicate across linguistic barriers.

Language in the multicultural context: There are two possible situations in this context.

- (a) The first situation is that in which a single officially recognised language serves so many cultural groups. A good living example is the United States of America where the English Language is the national or unifying language for citizens who were immigrants or descendants of immigrants, who settled in the same part of the country or the same section of the city, ranging from the Irish American, the Jewish American, the Japanese American,

the German American, the Vietnamese American and others.

- (b) The other situation is that in which the community is multilingual and multicultural. However, I like to make a few relevant points here. There are two forces operating simultaneously in any specific community which is either monolingual and multilingual or multilingual and multicultural. They are:
- i. the centrifugal force or tendency towards ethnic, sectional and regional solidarity or unity, and
 - ii. the Centripetal force, of tendency towards national solidarity and a national cultural identity.

These forces tend to be continuously locked in constant struggle for supremacy over each other. Where the centrifugal force gains the upper hand both linguistically and culturally, the movement will be towards a national character, in spite of the continued existence of the regional cultures and ethnic languages at the expense of the national and central culture, and language of national solidarity.

Multicultural: More typical is the situation like in Nigeria where so many languages represent so many cultures. Here the ethnic communities are in their traditional cultural environments. Ethnic loyalty and language loyalty are strong due to the fact that the Centrifugal force or the regional ethnic tendency had been well entrenched before the more recent Centripetal force. It showed the incipient national solidarity idea, more evident in the national administrative capital which had since come into the scene. Even in the cities and capitals which have to be melting-pots of cultural types, the pattern of being parentage tend to give the centrifugal force more edge over the centripetal. The problem in communities like this is mainly that of welding a national culture and

language together or creating one in spite of the predominant negative force.

The Nigerian Language Situation: The Nigerian language situation shows the existence of about 521 indigenous languages supporting their various cultures. Some of these are regional languages which serve as lingua franca to so many cultural groups who still retain their own cultures. In addition to this is the English Language, the language of official transaction which supports a Modern Nigerian culture, which has been influenced by Western political, educational and technological patterns of life.

The Christian and Moslem influences have resulted in another pattern of cultures which is contemporary. Here in Nigeria, the Nigerian multicultural context is more complex. This may be due to the number of languages and cultures involved or to the unavailability of data for taking a firm decision. The English Language as an elaborated code and language of transactional relationship among the elite cannot be rightly assigned the role of a full-fledged lingua franca; it is not our national language because it is not like the Paraguayan Gurani an indigenous language of national culture and cultural identity. It is also not like the Tanzanian Swahili.

2. Pidgin English is much widely spread but is still not regarded as a lingua franca in the national sense. It is neither an detailed code nor a restricted code. It is not like the Tanzanian Swahili, a language of broad social communication.

3. The three major Nigerian Languages: These have a substantial population of mother tongue speakers as well as varying numbers of second language users. Hausa has the greatest number of non-native speakers. None has been a literary language like the Ethiopian Amharic and Tigrina. They are regional lingua francas with the status of the Tanzanian Swahili. These are

languages according to our Educational Policy that we want to encourage to develop into national languages. Like in the Switzerland context where three languages are given equal status, we may end up with four languages, English, Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo as official national languages.

4. The other Nigerian Languages: These mostly serve as restricted codes in their various cultural contexts. They have embedded in them the basic local, cultural values, traditional attitudes and indigenous patterns of relationship. To their mother tongue groups (this includes the three major languages), they are emblems of cultural independence and social identity. It is through them that people identify with the concept of Nigeria as a nation. Some of these languages have in recent years, along with English and Arabic, enjoyed the status of literacy languages. At this point, one would naturally like to ask a few questions: what new roles are being planned for these languages in this multicultural environment? Are Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo being prepared to bear the burden of language of national culture or just languages of literacy and numeracy? If this is so, what role will English play? Is it possible for an indigenous to serve the purposes for which English and the other minority languages are now being used? Projects to develop vocabularies for the three major languages have been commissioned. Are we sure that the present policy will help produce a national language, a language of national culture which will not be seriously made ineffective by centrifugal forces, not taken into account in the planning? The writer should like to end with the following quotation from Muriel Serville – Troike (1982): “The very concept of the evolution of culture is dependent on the capacity of humans to use language for purposes of organizing social cooperation”. What man needs most in this socially complex and

dangerously technologically advanced world is cooperation and Language is a tool for achieving this, nationally and internationally. Linguistic scientists must see themselves as promoters of cooperation and progress through linguistic mystery hunting.

The national Language question: The quarrel of the National Language question is that where Nigeria does not have an indigenous lingua franca. This consequently has generated two major linguistic problems. They emanate from the importation of English into the country, as far back as the 15th century (Odumah, 1987); and also from Lord Lugard’s amalgamation of the Southern and Northern protectorates in 1914. Along with this foreign language issue is also the rise in its foreign culture. Through acquisition of the language and through its knitted foreign culture and ethos, Nigerians did not, as Awobuluyi (1989) puts it, identify with it, do not have any feeling of allegiance to it and do not possess an iota of emotional attachment to it. So, the English Language does not, at all, qualify as the Nigerian National Language. It was seen in 1960 that Nigeria gained its independence. But it was not until 1961 a Member of Parliament urged the Government in consultation with the Regional Governments, to introduce the teaching of Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and other Languages into institutions of learning throughout the country with a view to adopting one of them as official language in the future (Adeyanju, 1989).

Seventeen years after, the Government recognizes three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. From the standpoint of language policy, the government has incapacitated itself by giving official recognition to three (3) out of over five-hundred and twenty one (521) languages and by using the derogatory term “major” implying that all the other over 518

languages are MINOR languages. This does not go down well with most people. Government also proposes the medium of instruction in the primary school to be initially the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community and, at a later stage, English. A lot of contradiction abounds in this statement. If the mother-tongue or the language of immediate community is not officially acknowledged or if the language is not developed or codified, how will it be practical for use as a medium of instruction? Besides there are only two major statements in the constitution that borders on language: "The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English and Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made thereof." (The Constitution, 1999). The above implies that among the members of the National House of Assembly, English only shall be used. It equally informs that in future Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba shall be used. What first attracts one's attention is the futuristic clause: "when adequate arrangement has been made". In essence, what the constitution means is that Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba might be used in future.

The last major criticism of the constitutional statement is the totalitarian posture that the language poses to the corporate unity of the nation. The members of the National Assembly are representing speakers of about 521 languages across the country. How practicable then is it to select just three of the 521 indigenous languages, and how unfair? Apart from the obvious problem of modality that has been pointed out above, what manner of selection shall be used in a thoroughly multilingual state? Another essential fact is that the constitutional statement has not made any categorical statement for an indigenous language to take over from English. It is not surprising, then, that no state has been able

to use another language other than English. An idea of the Federal Government for amalgamating the three major languages coined into "WAZOBIA", meaning in English "COME" was rejected (Bamgbose, 1980), because it was considered unrealistic and futile. Amalgamating various Nigerian Languages as "Guosa" was rounded off by Elugbe (1994) who concluded that such a serious business of national language and of national development must not be stalled by such trivial and self-indulgent pursuit.

More recently, there is a clamour to sponsor the "Nigerian Pidgin" as a national language in Nigeria (Adegbija, 1994; Elugbe, 1994). Its proposers attributed five major points to its advantage. Its demerit was that it was difficult to legislate the Nigerian pidgin as a Lingua franca. They saw it did not have roots in any of the Nigerian cultures. Yet, Nigerian cherishes the need for an indigenous Lingua Franca.

Opposition to this view could not exist among the multiplicity of languages in Nigeria. Experts believe there must be a close relationship between language and culture. What this means is that if there could be as many as 521 languages in Nigeria, we should equally expect as many different cultures as possible. The implication of this is that whichever language is selected as the National Language, it has, undoubtedly, tended to suppress the cultures of all its users. Thus, there arise two problems:

(a) Linguistic domination and acculturation (culture suppression). The problem worsens if the selected language has economic, social, political and educational advantages over the others. In addition, Nigeria by such language policy would inadvertently create a linguistic hegemony. This would be an unfortunate development for the corporate growth of the nation.

This language question identifies two sets of languages – languages of the majority and languages of the minority. On the other hand is the wrangling among speakers of the so-called majority languages – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba spoken predominantly in the Northern, Eastern and Western parts of the country respectively. Each of these three giants claims superiority over the other two. On the other hand, there is the wrangling between speakers of the majority and the minority languages. Because of the fear of political, social and economic domination that is already implanted in the tribes of the minority sections of the country, and coupled with the ever increasing crude oil in the Southern minority regions, a stage is set for a fierce

rejection of any further domination, be it linguistic or cultural.

(b) In addition, in the North and the middle belt, there were fierce hostilities and, indeed, open confrontations especially in the non-Hausa speaking tribes in Kaduna. All this stands to show the extent of bad blood among the majority and the minority tribes. There is harshness in the selection of a language for a common use among the minority languages. Thus, it is becoming increasingly impossible to select as a national language, one of our indigenous languages.

Adekunle (1976) gave information on multilingual European countries that have monolingual language policy.

Countries	Tribes
Spain	Catalans, Basques and Galianins etc
United Kingdom	The Welsh, Irish and Scots etc
USSR	The Finns, Estonians, Ukrainians, people of Caucasus

African multilingual countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania already have their national language (Mhina, 1979). Thus a major problem is contributed by the lukewarm attitude of the Nigerian government towards the issue of an indigenous national language.

Suggestions:

i) To solve Nigerian Language question, the language spoken by the smallest (MICRO) population in the country should be selected. The language spoken by the thinnest population might not have been codified and, in fact, might not have been elaborated enough to cover terms in the modern-day science and technology. To overcome this, we propose that the selected language should be allowed to develop from within (ENDO), then expand to some other languages in form of borrowing, indirectly or directly. After all, according to Adeyanju (1989):

“Borrowing is a normal consequence of the natural

contact of language in multilingual societies, especially economically subordinate linguistic minorities. All of the so-called world languages today – Arabic, English and French have loan words from one language or the other”.

- ii) Any proposal that does not take into cognizance the multilingual nature of the country is not likely to succeed.
- iii) Conversely, any language policy that fails to recognise the presence of a speech community, thereby avoid language dominance in its proposal is neither likely to succeed.
- iv) A feasible indigenous language policy must not legitimise one language at the expense of the others. Indeed, it should recognise and develop the other languages. Yet the importance of English as a world language must

not be discounted. Indeed, in any indigenous language policy, factors of the benefits of English to Nigeria must be properly harvested and harnessed.

- v) Another linguistic problem in choosing a lingua franca for Nigeria is the existence of the new idea that 521 indigenous languages exist (Oyetayo, 2006). That out of the languages, 510 are spoken. Nine of the languages are extinct since they are no longer spoken. Two are sign languages and they have no mother tongue speakers. The complex problems thereby embedded in the indigenous languages will create fresh grounds for language experts to make enquiries. The labour is infinitely wide.

Conclusion

We have tried in this work to review various attempts made to evolve a truly indigenous national language. We, equally, exposed what we know has militated against a selection till date, since the idea was first mooted in 1961. It has been suggested that the Federal Government should be more serious on the issue and should involve language experts in the proposal. Furthermore, any mention of the ESL situation in Nigeria is, however, not complete without a mention of the multi-ethnic composition of the country. This factor could provide a healthy environment where English language could be laced with indigenous languages and a new body of language which will be nationally and internationally intelligible will emerge, and will be seen as a distinct Nigerian variety, the Nigerian English.

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