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Nigeria: Ethno-linguistic Competition in the Giant of Africa

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10.1 Introduction

Nigeria is a country with an immense population of over 140 million, the largest in Africa, and several hundred languages and ethnic groups (over 400 in some estimates, 510 according to *Ethnologue* 2005), though with no single group being a majority, and the three largest ethnic groups together constituting only approximately half of the country's total population. Having been formed as a united territory by British colonial forces in 1914, with artificially created borders arbitrarily including certain ethnic groups while dividing others with neighbouring states, Nigeria and its complex ethno-linguistic situation in many ways is a prime representation of the classic set of problems faced by many newly developing states in Africa when decisions of national language policy and planning have to be made, and the potential role of language in nation-building has to be determined. When independence came to Nigeria in 1960, it was agreed that English would be the country's single official language, and there was little serious support for the possible attempted promotion of any of Nigeria's indigenous languages into the role of national official language. This chapter considers the socio-political and historical background to the establishment of English as Nigeria's official language, and the development of the country over the subsequent post-independence era, and asks the following question. After five decades of experience of life with English as the nation's sole official language, if people in Nigeria were to be given the opportunity to reformulate national language policy as they wished, might one expect a different official language structure to be requested, perhaps with one or a combination of indigenous languages as a replacement for English, or is the current English-centred structuring of officialdom felt to be satisfactory and appropriate given the ethnic configuration of the country? In approaching this question and the issues which relate to it, the chapter refers to the results of a range of revealing surveys carried out by sociolinguists in Nigeria in recent years which have attempted to probe public

attitudes towards language(s) in the country and which provide useful insights into the relation of language to national identity in Nigeria. The chapter is organized in the following way. Section 10.2 first provides an overview of the broad array of languages in Nigeria, highlighting properties of the major three indigenous languages, Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, as well as the presence of English and Nigerian Pidgin English as significant forces in the country. Section 10.3 then describes how Nigeria came into existence historically as a British-ruled territory and what kind of administrative structures and language hierarchies were inherited and essentially accepted for the future of Nigeria at independence. Section 10.4 considers how Nigeria has developed as a country from the 1960s through to the end of the twentieth century, a period including a damaging civil war fought between the Igbos and government forces in the late 1960s and much ethnic rivalry and competition for political power and resources in the decades following that, with the population of the Hausa-speaking Muslim north of the country and that of the more heavily Christian south with its dominant Yorubas often seeing themselves as adversaries rather than as co-nationals cooperating in the construction of a better Nigeria for all those living in the country. Sections 10.5 and 10.6 subsequently return to the national language issue, discussing attitudes to language in present-day Nigeria, and consider how different sections of the population appear to express primary loyalties and support for different languages depending in part on the size of the ethnic group they belong to and the geographical location they occur in, as well as the general level of respect that is accorded to a language. The chapter is concluded with an assessment of how the ethnic configuration of the country combined with economic factors and attitudes towards language may conspire to force a particular policy on national-level language in Nigeria.

10.2 An Overview of Languages in Nigeria

Nigeria's many languages are spread broadly throughout the country's thirty-six states and have populations that vary quite considerably in size, with three particular ethno-linguistic groups making up over half of the total population, having in excess of 20 million mother tongue speakers each, a further ten languages falling in the 1 to 5 million range, sixty languages having between 100,000 and 1 million speakers, and the remaining several hundred languages consisting in much smaller groups, in many cases with linguistically endangered populations.

Although it is currently not possible to obtain fully accurate and reliable figures of the populations of all Nigeria's ethnic groups, due to the fact that groups may sometimes over-report their size as a means to access more government resources, Table 10.1, adapted from Badru (1998: 3), provides a reasonable picture of the proportional size of the larger groups present in the country.¹

¹ Note that the figures from Badru (1998) here reflect the proportional relation of the country's population shortly after independence in the 1960s. As there have been no really significant changes in population development among the larger ethnic groups since that time (with the possible exception of



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With a population now estimated to be between 25 and 30 million, the Hausas are the most populous of Nigeria's three major ethnic groups and numerically dominate the northern part of the country. Unlike the majority of Nigeria's languages, which are members of the Niger-Congo family, Hausa is an Afro-Asiatic language (Chadic sub-branch), and its original speakers migrated into the area of Nigeria from further east during the first millennium, settling in the fertile savannah area between the forested southern part of Nigeria and the beginnings of the Sahara further to the north. Rather than forming a unified empire, the Hausas established separate city-states which regularly competed with each other in trading with the trans-Saharan caravans which arrived from North Africa, converting to Islam in the process to facilitate relations with Arabic traders (Nelson 1982: 13). In the nineteenth century, 'Hausaland', the area primarily connected by common usage of the Hausa language, was invaded by Fulani people who successfully installed themselves as the rulers of the Hausa, but also adopted Hausa language and culture in many cases. The result of this mingling of the Fulani with the Hausa is that the Fulani are now often indistinguishable from

partial depletion of the Igbo population during the Nigerian civil war), and other statistics on individual groups have often been gathered at different times. Table 10.1 remains a good impression of the size of the three major groups relative to each other and the other larger languages.

Table 10.1 Nigerian ethnic groups

Group	% of population
Hausa-Fulani	29.5
Yoruba	20.3
Igbo	16.6
Kanuri	4.1
Ibibio	3.6
Tiv	2.5
Ijaw	2.0
Edo	1.7
Nupe	1.2
all others	17.5

the Hausa, and the term Hausa-Fulani is sometimes used to refer to the Hausa together with the assimilated Fulani.² Currently, Hausa is used both as a mother tongue and as a lingua franca throughout a significant amount of northern Nigeria and further afield in West Africa in Niger, Togo, Benin, Ghana, and Mali. Having been written down for many centuries in an adaptation of Arabic script known as Ajami, since colonial times the language has been commonly represented with Romanized orthography whose conventions are now fully standardized both in Nigeria and other countries where Hausa occurs. The language itself has also long been standardized, partly as the result of its use in the British colonial administration of northern Nigeria.

The second largest ethno-linguistic group in Nigeria is that of the Yorubas, who dominate the southwestern part of the country. For much of their history, the Yorubas did not exist as a politically united people with a common identity, but instead were organized in many subgroups and separate kingdoms which often fought against each other, for example the Ife, Oyo, Ijebu, Kabba, Ondo, and several others. The global referring term 'Yoruba', which originally referred to the Oyo people as the Yorubas proper, was indeed said to have been first coined and spread by outsiders, the Hausa and then Christian missionaries, as a way of referring to all those groups who spoke a related and mutually intelligible 'Yoruba' language, and it was only quite some time later that the term was also adopted by Yoruba-speakers themselves, as a genuine shared identity began to establish itself during colonial rule due to the occurrence of inter-ethnic competition (Gordon 2003: 12–13). Currently, there are populations of Yoruba speakers not only in southwestern Nigeria, but also in neighbouring Benin and also Togo, due to the way that the region was partitioned into separate territories by European colonial forces, as well as in Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Senegal as the result

² Elsewhere the Fulani, who originate from the area of modern-day Senegal, are known as the Peul (in Senegal) and as the Fula (in Mali), and their language, which is from the Western Atlantic branch of Niger-Congo may be called Fulfulde (Gordon 2003: 14).

of recent migration and settlement of Yorubas as traders. Within Nigeria itself, Yoruba is known and used by the native speakers of many other smaller languages in the 'Midwest' area to the immediate east of Yorubaland, but otherwise is not as extensive in its occurrence as a lingua franca in the south of the country as Hausa is in the north. A standard orthography for Yoruba was finally agreed on in 1974 by the Yoruba Studies Association of Nigeria, and is now used to teach standard Yoruba, which is based on the Oyo dialect. There is a growing literature in the language, several newspapers, and regular use of standard Yoruba on television and the radio, though different dialects of the language are still in widespread use in Yorubaland. In terms of religious affiliation, Christianity, Islam, and traditional religion forms all exist quite peaceably among the Yorubas, with Christians being in the clear majority. Religious differences have never been the source of any major conflict amongst the Yoruba themselves (Sadiku 1996: 127).

Situated in southeastern Nigeria, the Igbos are today Nigeria's third major ethnic group. Like the Yorubas, the Igbo in pre-colonial times were not organized as a single empire or kingdom, and in fact occurred in much smaller organizational units, over 200 'village groups' made up of collections of up to thirty villages apiece (Nelson 1982: 105). Despite the sharing of a common language (in various dialect forms), the Igbo like the Yoruba experienced periods of warfare between their various subgroups and only developed a clearer pan-Igbo identity during the course of the twentieth century, this becoming particularly salient in the aftermath of the civil war which resulted in much loss of Igbo life (section 10.4). The Igbo language has a standardized form and an accepted, standard orthography, though less of a long tradition of writing than that associated with Hausa, and more restricted use as an inter-ethnic lingua franca than either Hausa or Yoruba, partly as an effect of the defeat of Igbo forces in the civil war. The majority of Igbo people are now Christians, though Islam and traditional forms of religion also occur among the Igbos.

Quite generally, the most populous areas of Nigeria today are the areas where the three major languages occur – the north (and in particular the central part of the north), the southwest, and the southeast, and these highly populous areas are heavily dominated by Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo. In terms of broader linguistic divisions, the southern two-thirds of the country is mostly composed of languages from the Niger-Congo group (including Yoruba and Igbo), while the north has a range of Afro-Asiatic languages. A much smaller number of Nilo-Saharan languages (including Kanuri, with circa 3 million speakers) is also present in Nigeria.

In addition to the three major indigenous languages, Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, a further semi-indigenous variety of language that plays a useful, daily role in the lives of many Nigerians is Nigerian Pidgin English/NPE, which is known, understood, and used primarily as a second language lingua franca by over a third of the population, in particular in the southern parts of the country. Commonly assumed to be derived from early contact between Europeans (initially Portuguese, later British) and indigenous people living along the coast of Nigeria, NPE now occurs in two main regional

varieties, Port-Harcourt and Warri-Sapele-Benin and has a mother-tongue population of approximately one million. Currently there is still no recognized standard form of NPE or fully accepted way of writing the language, but it does occur used in television, on the radio, and in certain forms of literature. Section 10.5 returns to consider the place of NPE and also standard English in Nigerian society today and the attitudes that are associated with these two forms of language. First of all, however, the chapter considers the socio-political and linguistic development of colonial and post-independence Nigeria.

10.3 Colonial Rule and the Creation of Nigeria

European contact with the territory of Nigeria began in the fifteenth century with the arrival of the Portuguese, followed by the British, French, and Dutch in the sixteenth century. When the Europeans first came to Nigeria, it was the northern, savannah areas inhabited by the Hausas that were the most prosperous, with sizeable cities, having profited for many centuries from involvement in the important trans-Saharan trade of textiles, gold, salt, spices, and also slaves. As the Europeans established themselves on the coast and developed a significant new trans-Atlantic slave trade, this began a shift in the focus of commerce to the south of Nigeria, further strengthened when the slave trade was abolished in the early nineteenth century and came to be replaced by lucrative sea-borne trade in products such as palm oil, rubber, and coffee, transported to Europe in exchange for European manufactured goods, tobacco, guns, and iron (Falola 1999: 46). A monopoly over such trading from the area of southern Nigeria was then granted by the British and its naval forces to the Royal Niger Company, which received the authority to charge duties on the trade it oversaw and began to develop control over territory in the interior of Nigeria both via treaties negotiated with local chiefs and the utilization of force. As the southern interior was explored and subsequently exploited by British commercial interests, missionary activity made its presence felt in much of the south of Nigeria, particularly during the second half of the nineteenth century, this resulting in the study and description of many indigenous languages, with grammars of a range of languages being produced, including Yoruba, Nupe, Efik, and Kanuri (Crowder 1962b: 132–3). Contact with Europeans over a period of time also led to the development of a pidgin used in trading. Meanwhile in the north of the territory of Nigeria, the nineteenth century saw the Hausa states being overrun by the Fulani people in a major jihad set on spreading and reforming Islam in the region. Prior to the nineteenth century, Islam was largely only practised by the Hausa elites in northern Nigeria. Following the successful replacement of the Hausa leadership by the Fulani led by Sheikh Uthman dan Fodio and the establishment of the extensive Sokoto Caliphate, Islam became widely embedded as the dominant religion of the north of Nigeria.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century, the British extended their control over almost all the area of modern-day

Nigeria. When the borders of this British possession were agreed upon with the other European powers competing for territory in West Africa, the French and the Germans, it resulted in the division of the Yoruba and the Hausa into different countries and the rather arbitrary incorporation of a vast number of quite distinct peoples in a single administrative structure (Falola 1999: 60). In fact, what evolved in the area of Nigeria was at first three formally separate territories: the Crown Colony of Lagos in the south-west, the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, and the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria. The former two were quickly merged in 1906 as the Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, and then amalgamated with the north in 1914, under the governorship of Lord Frederick Lugard. Lugard saw the north of Nigeria as significantly different from the south, however, and so instituted rather different policies in north and south, hindering fully equal integration of Nigeria and helping entrench what was set to become a long-lasting internal division in the country that would be the source of many future problems. Throughout Nigeria, the decision was taken to administer the country via indirect rule and the use of indigenous, local rulers who would collect taxes and resolve disputes on behalf of the British in return for British support and legitimization of their positions of authority. The rationale for indirect rule was that it would both minimize the administrative costs of governing the huge territory of Nigeria, and reduce the general visibility of the British colonial presence and its intrusion in Nigeria. Indirect rule was heralded as a great success in the north of the country, where the British allowed the Fulani rulers to continue in their role as emirs and leaders of the northern population, promising minimal interference in the daily life of those in the north and a guarantee of respect for the continued practice of Islam. Christian missionary activity in the north was consequently only permitted in those areas which were not Islamic (Akinwumi 2004: 20). Elsewhere, in the south, however, the policy of indirect rule resulted in much resentment as it often created local rulers with powers far greater than those traditionally permitted in indigenous societies such as those of the Yoruba and the Igbo. Effectively answerable only to the British and no longer needing the support of the communities they were responsible for, many of the newly established local rulers became corrupt and abused their positions of authority (Gordon 2003: 77). The 'assignment' of populations to specific rulers and new structures of governance also began to create broader connections among people now dominated in the same way and the emergence of a wider collective ethnicity that had not existed in pre-colonial times.

In terms of official language use and education, the British developed the south and the north of Nigeria in different ways. In the south, the British relied heavily on Nigerian interpreters to communicate with indigenous people, a policy which accorded much potential power to the interpreters and often resulted in abuse of this power (Falola 1999: 73). The interpreters and many other petty officials employed in the administration of southern Nigeria needed to acquire a proficiency in English in order to be able to interact with the higher level British administrators, and education in English along with other simple skills was essentially provided by missionary

schools wherever these were available, rather than by institutions of education established by the government. In the main, the British aimed to keep the indigenous people of Nigeria largely unchanged and undeveloped as a way to ensure the continuation of colonial rule. Consequently, as long as the missionary schools supplied enough minor officials with a basic knowledge of English, it was felt that there was no need to establish education on a broader basis for the masses, and most indigenous people outside a small, increasingly privileged elite were not able to access any form of education (Gordon 2003: 80).

In the north of the country, the situation was rather different. Due to the occurrence of Hausa as a *lingua franca* in much of the north, it was decided that Hausa should be used as the language of administration. In addition to being widely understood by the northern population, Hausa had the advantage that it had already been standardized and successfully used to generate a tradition of literature in pre-colonial times (Adegbija 1994: 43). The adoption of Hausa by the colonial bureaucracy had the effect of spreading the language still further, and British administrators also learned and used the language. A significant change that has shaped the development of Hausa since the early colonial time is that when Hausa was officially adopted as the language of government administration, it was decided it should be represented with Roman rather than Arabic script. This government-led pressure on the language coupled with the clear opportunities to obtain work that a knowledge of Romanized Hausa opened up led to a decline in the use of Ajami to represent Hausa and an almost complete switch to Romanization over time (Igboanusi and Peter 2005: 47).

An important linguistic difference between the north and the south resulting from the British promise to exclude missionaries from the Islamic north and the decision to use Hausa in government administration was that missionary schools teaching English were not established in the north of Nigeria during the colonial period, and it was only in the south that proficiency in English developed. This geographical imbalance in the knowledge of English would later have harmful consequences for north–south relations when Nigeria neared independence and southerners came to dominate positions in the English-medium nationwide bureaucracy as well as other professions that required a Western education (Falola 1999: 78).

The education that was available in the south of Nigeria also had the effect of producing a new ambitious elite which often aspired to Western values and cultural habits. As this elite developed, it found itself increasingly frustrated by racial discrimination from the British and apparent limits placed on the advancement of Nigerians within the civil service. Further challenged by economic difficulties experienced during the worldwide depression of the 1930s, the new southern elite began to criticize the colonial government and call for greater participation in the running of the country. A nationalist movement thus began in the 1930s and produced national, multi-ethnic organizations such as the Nigeria Youth Movement demanding improvements in social conditions and genuine inclusion in political

decision-making. In the 1940s, the nationalist movement attained a mass following, having earlier been restricted to the educated elite, and started to call for a timetable that would lead to a full transfer of power to Nigerians and independence for the country. Though many of the political parties that were formed at the time had ethnic or regional bases, there was clear cooperation between them and open commitment to the common cause of obtaining national self-determination (Oyebade 2003: 23).

In the 1950s, as the attainment of independence seemed guaranteed and set to occur not far off in the future, the mood in Nigerian politics changed dramatically. Replacing earlier emphasis on pan-Nigerian ideals and the targeting of an ethnically unified and harmonious nation came unashamed new appeals to divisions in ethnicity, region, and religion as a way to mobilize support in political campaigns and elections. Politicians quickly found that the utilization of regional and ethnic issues was the easiest and most effective way to recruit a population that would vote for them, and political parties evolved into entities with a narrow focus on a specific ethnic group or region rather than a national agenda and the goal of winning electoral support from all parts of the country. In southwest Nigeria the Egbe Omo Oduduwa was a Yoruba party which attempted to bring together all of the subgroups present in Yorubaland with emphasis on the shared creation myth and common spiritual home of Yoruba speakers (Gordon 2003: 94). In the southeast, the Igbo State Union and the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons/NCNC (later renamed the National Council of Nigerian Citizens) were both Igbo-based organizations from the 1950s onwards which in similar fashion championed the cause of an Igbo nation which politicians simultaneously tried to establish in the minds of Igbo-speakers, even composing a new Igbo national anthem (Akinwumi 2004: 152). In the north, the Jamiyar Mutenan Arewa and the Northern People's Congress reacted by using Islam and reference to the past glory of the Sokoto Caliphate to attract political support (Falola 1999: 91). Many of the minorities also created political organizations to defend their particular interests, for example the Ibibio State Union, the Tiv Progressive Union, the Calabar Improvement League, and the Borno Youth Movement, among others (Akinwumi 2004: 152). In many instances, these new political organizations had to significantly invent the ethnicities they claimed to represent and then work at convincing local and regional populations that they collectively belonged to the same ethnic group. Although this was no easy task to begin with in various instances,³ as historically Yoruba-speakers, Igbo-speakers, and Hausa-speakers had not formed unified groups with clear cross-group loyalties, after a certain time the rhetoric and insistence of the new breed of politicians achieved their desired results and, as observed in Gordon (2003: 83): 'It was not long before communities that had previously not identified as a people began to see themselves as tribes and to mobilize on this basis.' The activities

³ Gordon (2003: 96) describes one case where an Igbo leader conceded that an Igbo identity practically did not exist after having spent four years canvassing Igbo speakers from 1947 to 1951 and trying to convince them (with little success) that they all belonged to a single Igbo people.

of politicians in the 1950s thus did much to coalesce and embed broad new ethnic identities where they had previously been weak and ill-defined. With regard to the Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo populations, it is commonly argued that the British division of Nigeria into different regions considerably assisted the development of regional and ethnic identities. Having established separate regional administrations in the north and south of the country from an early time, in 1939 the south was further divided into separate southwest and southeast regions, in theory to improve the quality and speed of regional administration. However, such a partitioning also created a situation in which each of the three major language groups in Nigeria came to be numerically dominant in its own region, allowing for region and major ethno-linguistic group to become more closely identified with each other, heightening the potential for rivalry and competition for resources to be linked to ethnicity and official homeland. The division of Nigeria into three administrative regions was also foreseen as continuing on after independence in various constitutions that were drawn up by the British in preparation for an ultimate handover of power. The 1954 constitution furthermore permitted each region to request self-government, which the (south-)western and eastern regions did in 1956, and the north in 1959, resulting in Nigeria becoming a federation of three regions each with its own legislative and executive power, and decreasing connections between the three parts of the country, outside the important competition for central resources.

With the development of powerful ethnic blocs among the Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo and their domination of the three regions, the minorities in Nigeria became increasingly worried for their future, and called for the creation of new states where they could live without the threat of being marginalized and potentially discriminated against in access to employment and education. Differences in religion between the north and the south of the country further compounded tensions present in pre-independence Nigeria, and were added to by a general northern concern that the southern elites would dominate the country following independence. The north consequently insisted that its large population be guaranteed a proportional representation in any post-independence government so as to assure itself of adequate defensive political power. Gordon (2003: 97) neatly sums up some of the principal worries that faced the country as it neared independence:

- The north feared domination by the more economically developed south. The north was determined to balance southern economic dominance with political dominance.
- The south feared domination by the north. The north's population size advantage would allow it to control the federal government and use its power to support northern interests.
- Minorities would be dominated by the biggest ethnic group in their region. Only by creating more regions, in which minorities could become majorities, could they be assured a fair deal.

When independence finally did arrive in 1960, the pan-Nigerian nationalist movement of the 1940s had been all but destroyed and replaced by self-seeking ethno-regional politics. In the words of Falola (1999: 91): 'Things would never be the same again as the leaders abandoned pan-Nigerian issues and focused more and more on regional concerns. Within one generation, nationalists became tribalists, interested in independence for narrow gains.' Having been ill-prepared for nationhood by the colonial practice of regionalism, Nigeria emerged as an independent state wracked with internal disharmony and serious question-marks hanging over the future stability and integrity of the country. Akinwumi (2004: 155) refers to 'an ethnic war [being] fought through ballot boxes' and quotes a Nigerian academic as summarizing the situation and how it would proceed in post-independence years in the following way:

By the time of national independence in 1960, Nigerian politics had become synonymous with the inter-ethnic struggle for power. Political power was perceived as an instrument in the struggle among ethnic groups for the division of national wealth.

10.4 Language and the Development of Nigeria: 1960–2003

10.4.1 Independence

As Nigeria became an independent state in 1960 made up of three large regions each dominated by a major ethnic group, elections resulted in the Northern People's Congress gaining control of the country's new government, though with the necessary support of the Igbo-led NCNC as a junior coalition partner. Having assured itself of a significant degree of dominance of central government, largely due to the voting power of its population which equalled that of both western and eastern regions combined, the north then moved to establish greater internal cohesion in its vast region (almost three-quarters of the total territory of Nigeria), through the intensification of a policy of 'Northernization' first initiated in 1957. Concerned by the possibility that members of the better educated and economically more successful southern population would take jobs away from northerners in the civil service and come to monopolize commercial activity, the policy of Northernization required that northerners be favoured over non-northerners in the competition for government employment wherever candidates' qualifications were otherwise similar. It also introduced restrictions on the purchase of land and the awarding of contracts for public works to southerners. Such affirmative action discriminating in favour of northerners led to much discontent, especially among Igbo migrants in the north, and resulted in many southerners actually losing government jobs and positions they already had (Okeke 1998: 7). Official Northernization was also partnered by serious attempts to further coalesce the huge population of the north and develop an increased sense of loyalty to the region which would even transcend that of loyalty to specific ethnic group, under the motto 'One North, One People, irrespective of religion, rank, or tribe' (Maduka-Durunze 1998: 80). Combined with the perception that the north was

now appropriating a disproportionate share of federal revenues for development of the north, much of which came from oil production in the eastern region, and the occurrence of feuding in the western region among rival Yoruba groups, the initial post-independence years retained the many ethnic and regional tensions that had characterized the years approaching independence.

In such an atmosphere of mutual mistrust, suspicion, and sometimes open resentment, a range of national issues had to be agreed upon as part of the development of Nigeria as a new, independent state in charge of its own affairs and identity. One of these concerned language and the question of what language(s) should be specified for use at the national level, in parliamentary discussion and national public address. The question was whether there should be any substantive change from linguistic practices in pre-independence Nigeria, or whether existing practices should simply be permitted to continue. The constitution adopted at independence in 1960 specified English as the language of parliamentary debate, hence official at the national level, as it had been during the colonial period. In 1961, once adjustment to self-government had been made, the issue of national language was revisited in parliament and generated much heated debate. Central to the discussion was a motion to spread the learning of Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo throughout the country with the ultimate goal of selecting one of the three major languages as the future national language of Nigeria (Elugbe 1994: 74). Parliamentary members from minority language groups put up particularly strong resistance to the idea of elevating either one or potentially all three of the major languages to the status of national language (Igboanusi and Ohia 2001: 128). With acrimonious discussion of the issue spilling out into the media, the motion to develop Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo as candidates for consideration as future national language(s) of the country was actually carried, but then subsequently not acted upon in any concrete way (Omamor 1994: 49), it being quietly concluded that it would be wiser and indeed safer to err on the side of caution rather than experiment with the open grooming and promotion of the major three languages while there was strong public opposition to such a move and serious instability caused by poor inter-ethnic relations. Nigeria was consequently left with English as its *de facto* official language in most formal domains at the national level, as under British rule, and without a clear road map for the establishment of a national language. Banjo (1981, quoted in Omamor 1994: 209) neatly summarizes the linguistic consequences of the fragile political situation in the post-independence era, stating that: 'the problems of an explicitly stated national language policy have been cautiously avoided because of their explosive implications'. And so things would continue, until at least the late 1970s.

At the regional level, official institutional support was however provided in the northern region for Hausa, as part of the Northernization drive, and the 1963 regional constitution of the north named Hausa as a co-official language of the region for potential use alongside English in the regional parliament. This effectively continued and formally endorsed the practice established during the colonial period in which

Hausa was recognized as an official language of government administration in the north (Omamor 1994: 48). It also considerably assisted the wide dissemination of Hausa throughout the north during the 1960s, which helped embed the growth of a common, supra-ethnic northern identity (Bamgbose 1991: 23).

10.4.2 Rising Conflicts and Civil War

The caution and restraint exercised with regard to specification of a national language policy in the early post-independence years was motivated by worries that Nigeria was not in a stable enough condition to initiate changes that might seem to favour one ethnic or regional group or set of groups over others. Such concerns were well justified given the backdrop of ethnic troubles that increasingly afflicted the country following independence. From 1960 to 1966 a continual stream of challenges to the establishment of ethnic and inter-regional harmony occurred, including serious north-south disputes both over census results in 1962 and 1963, and over regional election results in 1962 and 1965–66, the latter of which led to the deaths of thousands of people in the western region. Though the government attempted to reduce pressure from various minority groups worried by majority group domination through the creation of a new mid-western region from part of the western region in 1963, problems and tension continued to mount until by the end of 1965 ‘It became increasingly clear that sooner or later there would be a fundamental and probably violent change.’ (Mwakikagile 2001: 8).

This occurred in early 1966 when a group of Igbo army officers staged a coup and successfully overthrew the government, eliminating various senior political leaders, and seizing full control over the country. Claiming that the military takeover was inspired by the aim of ridding Nigeria of a corrupt leadership and restoring law and order to the country, the coup-makers and their motives soon came under question when it transpired that no Igbo politicians or key military personnel had been killed during the coup and of those newly promoted to senior positions in the army nearly 90 per cent were Igbos (Falola 1999: 117–18). The inhabitants of the northern region were then further dismayed by the declaration that the division of Nigeria into semi-autonomous regions administered by regional governments was going to be replaced by a fully unified administrative structure. Such a move threatened dangerously to dismantle the protection that Northernization and its policies offered against southern competition for jobs in the north, and confirmed suspicions in northerners’ minds that the coup was simply a bid to grab power for the south and allow for Igbo commercial exploitation of the northern region. The unguarded celebration of the coup by many Igbo migrants in the north compounded tensions, and demonstrations led to riots and then to violence against Igbos in the north. A counter-coup initiated by the northerner-dominated army then wrested power away from the Igbo military leaders, and hundreds of Igbo soldiers were killed along with tens of thousands of Igbo residents of the northern region. Following a mass exodus of Igbos from the north back

to the southeast and the threat from Igbo leaders that the eastern region would secede and declare itself an independent state, civil war ensued in 1967 and continued on for two and a half years until 1970, when the exhausted east finally capitulated. The first decade of independence in Nigeria thus culminated in a tragedy of huge proportions which all too clearly underlined the fragility of the new nation and how easily ethno-regional rivalries could spiral out of all control.

Though massively overshadowed by the destruction and loss of life resulting from the civil war, the immediate ethno-linguistic consequences of the conflict were that those eastern minority groups which might previously have fallen closely within the Igbo orbit and spoken Igbo as an inter-ethnic lingua franca switched to use other languages for the purposes of inter-group communication, most commonly Nigerian Pidgin and to a lesser extent Hausa (Igboanusi and Peter 2005: 29, 51). Negative attitudes towards the Igbo as the result of the war combined with concern at being seen to be close to the Igbo thus led to a clear linguistic distancing of many minorities from the latter and considerable reduction in the use of Igbo as a second language. This trend was further assisted by another significant development that had occurred just before the outbreak of the war. In an attempt to address the long-term concerns of many minority groups that they were continually being dominated by the major ethnic groups in the three principal regions of Nigeria, and to prevent threats of secession by the minorities, the government under Lt. Col. Gowon radically restructured the internal administrative divisions of Nigeria and partitioned the country into twelve new states. The replacement of the previously over-powerful and fiercely competitive regions with a larger number of smaller states was intended to reduce the potential for head-on conflict between large power blocs in the country, and was maintained as a structural reorganization after the civil war finally came to an end. In the former eastern region, the reorganization had the effect that various minorities found themselves in new states out of direct Igbo influence, and so freely switched to other mediums of wider communication.

10.4.3 The 1970s: Economic Growth and the Development of National Policies

Following the conclusion of the civil war, the government emphasized appeasement and reconciliation in the country, and a general amnesty granted to the Igbos together with a 'No Victor No Vanquished' policy did much to help mend broken relations and reintegrate the Igbo population with the rest of Nigeria (Okeke 1998: 23). Nigeria in the 1970s also benefited from a significant boom in oil prices, allowing for a sustained, major programme of public spending throughout the country building roads, hospitals, schools, and other badly needed components of infrastructure. In the latter part of the 1970s, public education expanded considerably as the result of the growth in the economy, with new schools and universities providing much broader popular access to education and learning than in previous decades (Falola 1999: 139). The 1970s

also proved to be a period of much less ethnic conflict and greater stability than the previous twenty years, perhaps due to the conversion of the regional structure into twelve smaller states and the elimination of the three powerful regions dominated by the Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo groups. Further lobbying from minority groups during the 1970s led to an expansion of the state system and the creation of seven new states in 1976, bringing the total up to nineteen. On a more negative note, the oil-driven economic growth experienced in the 1970s also brought with it the spread of serious corruption among those elected into positions of political power, where decisions on the awarding of contracts for public works and the construction of new infrastructure commonly led to huge self-enrichment among those controlling the decision-making process. Furthermore, in the scramble to obtain government-allocated resources, the practice of inflating population figures became endemic with the result that census figures were regularly challenged and often suggested to be heavily exaggerated (Falola 1999: 25).

Two important events occurred relating to the status and development of language in the latter part of the 1970s. The first of these, in 1977 (revised in 1981) was the declaration of the National Policy on Education. This was the first clear set of official guidelines on the use of language in primary and secondary education. In its first major pronouncement it stated that the medium of education in the early years of primary school (and in pre-school) should be the mother tongue of children being taught or the common language of the immediate community. Thereafter, and through secondary school, English was to be the medium of instruction. The National Policy on Education also indicated that during secondary school every child should learn one of the three major languages of the country, identified as Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, in addition to his/her mother tongue, as a way to encourage and develop national unity. Government policy makers thus recognized the value of mother-tongue education in the early years of schooling and also saw the potential that second-language learning of Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo might have for stimulating a greater sense of belonging to a single multilingual nation. At around this time, the effective use of mother-tongue education in primary schools had furthermore been clearly demonstrated in Nigeria in a project carried out by the University of Ife Institute of Education in which children in one primary school were taught uniquely in Yoruba for the first six years of schooling, and compared with others schooled in English during the same period. The results gathered in 1976 indicated that children taught via their mother tongue made better progress than those schooled in another, foreign medium, supporting general emerging assumptions in the international community about the importance of mother-tongue education.

The second significant government reference to the use of language in Nigeria came in the 1979 constitution. This officially approved the use of Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba as languages of discussion in the National Assembly, alongside English. At the sub-national, state level, the constitution indicated that the languages to be made use of in the country's various Houses of Assembly were to be English and the

dominant language(s) of the state, again allowing for a (localized) official status to be given to indigenous languages (Bamgbose 2000: 114). The constitution also specified the twin national goals of eliminating illiteracy in the country and making available free education for all citizens, from the primary level onwards, with primary education becoming mandatory for all Nigerian children (Bamgbose 1994: 9). Three years later a major nationwide literacy campaign was initiated to attempt to achieve the former goal within a ten-year period. In the late 1970s, language issues thus came openly onto the agenda in Nigeria, and started to gain a momentum with enthusiasm for the promotion of knowledge and wider formal use of indigenous languages in education and public affairs, stimulated by general economic prosperity in the country and the growth in educational facilities made possible by this prosperity.

10.4.4 The 1980s and 1990s: Military Rule and Economic Decline

In the 1980s and 1990s, however, the positive developments emerging in the 1970s suffered from a range of serious challenges. Oil prices dropped, the economy went into serious decline, the military took over power to eliminate major corruption and embezzlement among the political leadership, but then held on to power for well over a decade and a half, as unemployment, crime, and violent conflict relating to religion continued to rise dramatically. The economy crashed so badly during the period that the 1970s per capita income of £1,500 had dropped as low as £300 by 1998 (Falola 1999: 16), resulting in the poorest living standards experienced since independence and a large-scale collapse of many public services including education due to lack of financial support. Falola (1999: 200) remarks that: 'The media and the public began to talk of a nation in ruin, one that would require decades to rebuild', and adds that there were significant consequences for morale, with the spirit of cooperation being replaced by an 'every man for himself' attitude: 'Patriotism and nationalism were eroded – to many people Nigeria was not worth defending, it should be exploited for self-promotion' (Falola 1999: 175). Corruption and self-enrichment at the expense of the nation thus remained a major problem among the ruling elite and hindered whatever progress might have been made under the challenging circumstances.

Self-preservation and the need to struggle for resources with larger neighbours led minorities to call for the creation of more states, resulting in the establishment of two new states in 1987 and nine more in 1991, and a fragmented patchwork of self-governing administrative units that were barely economically viable in many cases and concentrated people's attention on the local rather than the national. Politically, there was disappointment and outrage when the results of general elections in 1993 were annulled by the military after being apparently won by a Yoruba candidate from the south. The fact that the military continued to be dominated by northerners led to feelings among southerners that forces loyal to the north would never relinquish political power to a southerner, worsening north–south relations.

Given the dramatic deterioration of the economy during the 1980s and 1990s it is perhaps not surprising that little real progress was made with the government's aspirations to institute nationwide mother-tongue education in primary schools. Although the ambitious intention was that children everywhere should receive their first three years of primary schooling in their mother tongue or the language of the local community, in practice this actually happened only sporadically, and more so in Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo areas and public schools than in minority areas and private education, which was set on providing all-English education from a very early age (primarily to satisfy the wishes of fee-paying parents that their children learn English well so as to be able to find better employment at a later age). Commonly it was claimed that a chronic lack of resources was (and to a significant extent still is) to blame for schools' inability to deliver mother-tongue education, causing both a shortage of teachers trained to teach through the medium of languages other than English, and a desperate lack of teaching materials in Nigeria's many languages, particularly in the case of the non-major languages. Odumuh (2000) describes an investigation of the real situation of mother-tongue education in a randomly selected set of public and private schools near to Abuja in a minority language area. The study reveals that 64 per cent of the primary school teachers used only English in their teaching, and the remaining 36 per cent used a combination of English and Nigerian languages, though the latter were often Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo which were not the languages of the local community or the mother-tongue of the children being schooled. It is noted that even where teachers did know the minority languages of the local community, they did not use these to teach with, as relevant teaching materials were unavailable and had not been developed. Other teachers noted that they did not know the local languages of the community they taught in, having grown up elsewhere in Nigeria. The study concludes that English is likely to remain the major language of instruction in primary schools for quite some time to come, as no real practical measures to help implement mother-tongue education have been funded by the government, aside from the development of certain materials in the three major languages.^{4,5}

Significant growth in the use of Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo in debates in the National Assembly, provided for by the 1979 constitution, has similarly not come about, with the lack of development of the major languages in high, formal domains again being

⁴ Following the targeted three years of mother-tongue education in primary school, use of languages other than English by students in primary and secondary schools is in fact often reported as being discouraged and students may even be penalized for speaking vernacular languages (Adegbija 1994).

⁵ A further, recent complication adding to the difficulties schools have in following government directives relating to language teaching came in 1998, when the military leader of the country, General Abacha, announced that French would henceforth be a co-official language of Nigeria and that all schoolchildren should begin learning the language. Finding teachers immediately able to teach French throughout Nigeria's schools was naturally an impossible task. With the death of Abacha later in the same year, the initiative to promote French as a co-official language seems to have been largely forgotten about, however, and Abacha's public support for French in 1998 was essentially just a political move, designed to win support from France at a time when the military regime in Nigeria was being isolated by other English-speaking countries in the West (Igboanusi and Peter 2004: 122).

attributed, at least partially, to a government failure to provide the necessary support for such a linguistic expansion. Although a project was initiated to create relevant new terminology for the major languages for use in a range of new domains, and there were proposals to hire translators to assist in multilingual parliamentary debates, with the end of the Second Republic in 1983 and the military takeover of government, the programme was discontinued and development came to a halt (Bamgbose 1991). Elsewhere, there is also attitudinal evidence of a strong dispreference towards the use of languages other than English in political institutions. Adebite (2004: 94) notes that in 1991 the Lagos State House of Assembly considered whether to permit the use of Yoruba in its meetings, Yoruba being the dominant language of the state and the mother tongue of the members of the assembly, but ultimately rejected such a possibility, stating that:

Yoruba language is not appropriate for the conduct of business of the House of Assembly since Lagos is a cosmopolitan city. Besides, its use is capable of demeaning and reducing the intellectual capacity of legislators. (*The Guardian*, 10 December 1999, quoted in Adebite 2004: 94)

Indeed, perhaps the only area in which the indigenous languages of Nigeria did seem to make clear progress in a relatively new domain during the 1980s and 1990s was in communication relating to agriculture, with government employees learning local languages so as to be able to interact with farmers (Oyetade 2001: 16). Meanwhile English continued to dominate the formal domains of life and showed a positive flourish in the area of literature, with Wole Soyinka becoming the first African writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. Nigerian authors writing in English had in general been very successful since the 1960s, and the high quality output of authors such as Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and Amos Tutuola was maintained throughout the difficulties of the 1980s and 1990s.

10.5 Language in Nigeria Today: Patterns and Attitudes

It is now approximately half a century since Nigeria established its independence and accepted a continuation of English as the country's single official language. Since that time Nigeria has experienced much and passed through periods of civil war, great prosperity, and also great economic challenge, military rule, as well as periodic occurrences of democracy. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the well-respected Nigerian historian Toyin Falola expressed a very bleak view of the country's position:

As Nigeria enters the next millennium, it does so as a weakened nation with its economy in a shambles, its politics unstable, its external image badly soiled, its people in great despair and agony, and violent protests and civil strife as routine occurrences. 'The giant of Africa' is now listed by the World Bank as one of the twenty poorest countries in the world. (Falola 1999: 16)

However, there are also more optimistic voices to be heard, and signs that the destructive power of ethno-regional politics might finally be changing. In 1999 a southerner was elected president for the first time, Olusegun Obasanjo, and then returned as president in elections in 2003. The fact that a Christian Yoruba was able to win more support in the Muslim north than in his ethnic homeland has been seen as an indication that voting along narrow ethnic, religious, and regional lines is no longer the near automatic occurrence it was in earlier years, and that political competition in Nigeria might be approaching a new, more open-minded maturity (Gordon 2003: 265). In this final section, the chapter asks whether, after five decades of independent development, the inherited policy of English as single official language is still the most appropriate, albeit imperfect, fit for Nigeria, or whether public opinion might support a change in the linguistic status quo and the establishment of a national language or set of national languages that would have a meaningful, widespread role in Nigeria and assist in the hitherto heavily neglected process of national integration and nation-building. In revisiting the national language issue here, we will take advantage of a range of informative surveys of attitudes towards languages in Nigeria which have been carried out in recent years, and which attempt to establish how speakers of various groups perceive their own and others' languages in both formal and informal domains. These include Oyètadè (2001), Igboanusi and Peter (2005), Babajide (2001), Igboanusi and Ohia (2001), and Adegbija (1994 and 2000).⁶ It should be noted that these surveys primarily investigate the views of educated speakers from the middle-class, typically students, teachers, journalists, and civil servants. Although this means that the views of those with less formal education are not directly canvassed in the surveys, the educated middle class is the section of society which is arguably most likely to have clear views and opinions on language issues and to be most vocal about possibilities of change in language policy, justifying the focus on this group in the language surveys. As it turns out, there are also clear differences of opinion in the various language groups investigated (Yorubas, Hausas, Igbos, and minority language groups), hence the acquisition of education does not lead to a uniform set of attitudes towards language and still allows for revealing cross-ethnic variation to be identified.

Considering first attitudes by speakers towards their mother tongues, the broad picture that consistently emerges from the various studies is that speakers of almost all languages in Nigeria express clear and strong feelings of loyalty towards their mother tongues when asked (see, for example, Adegbija 1994 for an overview). Amongst the three major languages, Hausa has been commonly found to command the highest degree of loyalty, followed by Yoruba and Igbo (Maduka-Durunze 1998: 74). In terms of actual figures, the comprehensive survey reported in Igboanusi and Peter (2005: 141) found that 87 per cent of Hausa speakers confirmed that their preferred language

⁶ Note that Adegbija (1994) is not a questionnaire-derived survey but an overview of general perceptions of attitudes towards languages in Nigeria made by the author.

in general was indeed Hausa, while 54 per cent of Yoruba speakers and 52 per cent of Igbo speakers specified Yoruba and Igbo respectively as their commonly preferred languages.⁷ When the consumption of language in the form of television, radio, newspapers, and magazines was investigated in the same study, similar ratios of preferred language were attested among speakers of Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, though with percentages being lower by at least one-third in the preferred language of reading. A significant portion of Igbo speakers in particular were found to prefer their mother tongue less than speakers of Hausa and Yoruba in the media and print. As for the speakers of minority languages, studies such as Adegbija (2000) report a high degree of the expression of loyalty and positive attitudes towards speakers' mother tongues and note that most minority languages are still highly valued in traditional areas of life. However, when speakers of minority languages are asked to explicitly rank languages according to their general preference, it is found that the mother tongue, though well esteemed, is very often not specified as the language of highest preference. Igboanusi and Ohia (2001: 132) note that a survey of northern and southern minorities averaged together indicated a higher general preference for English (50 per cent) than local, minority languages (42 per cent).

Turning to what Nigerians of various groups actually now speak in informal domains (as opposed to what they may express a general preference for), the declared language of use in the home is noted in Igboanusi and Peter (2005: 142) to be Hausa for 98 per cent of mother-tongue Hausa speakers, Igbo for 81 per cent of Igbo speakers, and Yoruba for 73 per cent of Yoruba speakers, much as might be expected given the cross-linguistically common domination of mother tongues in informal and domestic environments. Amongst speakers of minority languages, however, the same study indicates surprisingly that the common language of the home is in fact now Hausa for 57 per cent of the northern minorities, followed by English used by 18 per cent of speakers. In the south, 39 per cent of minority language speakers stated that English was the common language of the home, and 24 per cent that it was Nigerian Pidgin. As the authors of the survey point out, Hausa, English, and Nigerian Pidgin are therefore coming to dominate communication in informal domains where mother tongues are expected to be used, posing a serious threat to the continued transmission of many minority languages. Various researchers make the observation that individual state governments have often done little to provide institutional support for the minority languages spoken within their borders, even where a particular minority language may be spoken by a majority of the population within a single state, and that the failure of the implementation of the mother-tongue education policy may lead to rising generations acquiring more English and Hausa (in the north) in schools and importing this into the home, possibly even encouraged by their parents. With regards to Nigerian Pidgin, this seems to be growing in use in a number of domains

⁷ With both Yoruba and Igbo speakers, English was indicated as the preferred language by 42 per cent of those interviewed.

such as the media, music, commercial advertisements, political propaganda, and the world of sport, supplementing its widespread use in the army and the police. It does not, as yet, occur in more formal domains due to a lack of standardization and development, and therefore remains a threat and popular competitor to the use of minority languages only in informal interaction and mostly among those without education.

In terms of attitudes to the current and potential use of Nigerian languages in more formal domains such as education and government administration, the following has been observed through recent investigations. In the area of education, one survey reported in Adegbija (2000) noted that 77 per cent of its 600 respondents would be against the potential replacement of English as medium of school instruction with a Nigerian language, although 57 per cent conceded that students might learn more effectively if taught through the mother tongue. An earlier study, Iruafemi (1988) (referred to in Oyètade 2001: 19), which allowed its respondents a greater range of potential answers, showed that while only 6 per cent of parents approved of early education in just the mother tongue, only 24 per cent were in favour of English as the sole medium of early education, and a majority of 70 per cent supported the use of both English and the mother tongue as joint mediums of education. Concerning the government's policy for children to learn one of the major Nigerian languages as a second language subject, Igboanusi and Ohia (2001: 137) found that over 70 per cent of the minority language groups they interviewed thought the policy was a good one. However, only 25 per cent of those questioned thought the learning of the major languages in school would actually be of any obvious benefit to them or their offspring. The value of the policy may be attributed to its potential role in integration, 56 per cent of the same set of speakers stating that they thought that the increased, widespread use of the three major languages would stimulate unity among Nigerians. Relating to the perception of a relatively low instrumental value of the indigenous languages revealed in speakers' responses to the question about personal benefit resulting from the learning of the major languages, the low level of admission rates into university degree courses focused on Yoruba, Igbo, and (to a lesser extent) Hausa would seem to confirm that the major indigenous languages are generally not seen as important for success in obtaining good employment.

When asked whether the major languages might be able to cope effectively with application to science and technology, Adegbija's (2000) survey indicated that as many as 73 per cent of speakers felt this would not be possible, and similar preconceptions about the inherent unsuitability of the indigenous languages for scientific and advanced academic description are commonly reported in other works. As for current language preference in the area of official functions, Nigerian languages appear not to be highly valued and Igboanusi and Peter (2005: 101) found that the majority of speakers of all groups prefer the use of English in formal domains, with figures being around 90 per cent for Yoruba, Igbo, and minority groups, and 56 per cent for Hausa speakers (40 per cent of whom supported the use of Hausa in official functions). Finally,

with an eye on the future, Igboanusi and Peter (2005: 98) attempted to probe general speaker preference for a widespread future lingua franca in Nigeria, and it was found that Hausa speakers were the only group to have a majority in favour of its own Nigerian language as the future lingua franca of the country (58 per cent), and under 25 per cent of Igbo and Yoruba speakers indicated a preference for their language to be the future lingua franca of the country. With this last, revealing observation on attitudes to the indigenous languages in different domains of life in Nigeria, it is now time to consider attitudes towards the non-indigenous competitor language which currently dominates the formal domains of life in Nigeria: English.

As mentioned earlier, English is the language of most government administration, education (apart from early mother-tongue schooling), business, most occurrences of writing, the majority of the mass media, and also serves as a means of inter-ethnic communication for those who have received some education. Before we reflect on attitudes towards English as revealed in various surveys of recent years, it is useful to note down the principal arguments both for and against the position of English as Nigeria's leading language in formal domains, as these are often direct causes of the attitudes held towards the language. Commonly, there are two main criticisms of English as the country's single official language. The first of these is that English has been inherited from the former colonial power and is therefore both a non-indigenous language and a constant linguistic reminder of the humiliation of earlier colonial occupation and exploitation that should ideally be done away with, if at all possible. Adesanoye (1994: 86) summarizes the spirit of this view, observing that 'not a few well-intentioned Nigerians are of the opinion that total independence is chimerical as long as we still conduct our "independent" affairs in the language of the erstwhile colonists.' A second oft-made negative point about the maintenance of English as the official language of Nigeria is that English is only known by a minority of the population and that those who do not know English are automatically excluded from participation in the political life of Nigeria, as election to any government position requires at least a School Certificate level of education, which in turn necessitates proficiency in English (Maduka-Durunze 1998: 95).⁸ A third, related criticism that has frequently been made in recent times is that the standard of English attained by many occupying posts in government service is often poor, both in lower levels and sometimes also higher levels (Bamgbose 1994: 4). In education it is noted that a similar failure to master English well may be responsible in part for high drop-out rates in secondary schools (Ogunsiji

⁸ Concerning the actual percentage of the population that understands and can speak English, this is not well established and various figures are given in the literature, ranging from a low of around 10 per cent to just over 30 per cent. A recent piece of research by Simire (2004: 139) estimates that approximately 33 per cent of the population can speak, read, and write English, though perhaps only 15 per cent actually make regular use of English in their professional life. In theory, everyone who has completed more than three years of education should have had exposure to English in school and attained at least a basic familiarity with the language. As the educational system has experienced difficulties relating to financing and personnel since the 1980s, it is clear that success rates in schools, and hence the adequate learning of English, are far from ideal.

2001: 153), and that primary school teachers and university students also often have a less-than-satisfactory ability in English (Abdulkadir 2000: 245).⁹

Turning now to note what are most commonly highlighted as the principal advantages of keeping English as the official language of Nigeria, there are two key functions which English provides which no other Nigerian language could obviously replicate. First of all, precisely because of its foreign-sourced nature, English is seen to be an ethnically neutral language which has the capacity to unify the many different ethno-linguistic groups in Nigeria without according an explicit advantage to one group over the others. It is widely recognized that English does indeed constitute a unifying force in Nigeria and that there might well be more conflict in the country if English were not available as a neutral language for use in inter-ethnic communication (Bamgbose 1994: 84; Igboanusi and Peter 2005: 16). Such a neutral linguistic force is particularly appreciated by the minority groups, who may otherwise feel dominated by speakers of the major three languages. The second area in which English 'scores' very heavily is in its ability to provide access and links to the wider outside world and the science and technology that is necessary for Nigeria to develop and successfully compete with other countries. Without a well-established proficiency in English (or some other language of wider international communication) among its educated elite, Nigeria would be severely disadvantaged in a wide range of areas involving access to developing knowledge.

The factors noted above have a direct influence on attitudes towards English. In all of the major studies on attitudes towards languages in Nigeria, researchers report that English consistently receives a very high rating as the language of formal domains and is regularly ranked by a clear majority of speakers as (a) the preferred language of officialdom and administration, (b) the preferred language for written communication, (c) the language most important for the development of a full education through to secondary level, and (d) the preferred general lingua franca for Nigeria in the future. For minority groups, the general preference for English within formal contexts of life extends even further, as noted earlier, and a study averaging responses from both southern and northern minorities in Igboanusi and Ohia (2001: 132) showed that the language preferred overall across all domains by the majority of speakers (50 per cent) was indeed English (as opposed to a 42 per cent preference for mother tongue). For a great many speakers from different groups, English is also valued as a language of prestige, a sign of education, and a mark of modernity (Igboanusi and Peter 2005: 131). The

⁹ To be fair, it is not clear whether this general failure to achieve a high level of proficiency in English is due to any inherent difficulty in learning English in particular as opposed to other languages. If, for example, Hausa, an Afro-Asiatic language, were to be substituted for English in schools with speakers of minority Niger-Congo languages (as might happen if Hausa were to replace English as the medium of education in many of the northern states), it is far from evident that student achievement would be higher, and the non-indigenous nature of English should not automatically make it more difficult to learn than languages which are indigenous but which stem from different African language families. Rather, what might seem to be to blame here is either the system of such extensive use of a second language as medium of education, or the insufficient training of teachers themselves competent in English.

one obvious exception to these patterns reported in a number of surveys and works on language attitudes relates to mother-tongue speakers of Hausa, whose attitude towards English is much more ambivalent than that of other groups. The Hausas are regularly noted both to be extremely proud of their language, with such enthusiasm reportedly even leading to feelings of linguistic superiority among certain speakers, and to have much more frequent negative attitudes towards English than members of other groups, Babajide (2001: 7) estimating that approximately 62.5 per cent of Hausas may have negative feelings about English, compared to similar attitudes being held by only 15 per cent of Igbos and minority groups and 25 per cent of Yorubas. Nevertheless, Igboanusi and Peter (2005: 113) remark that even though English may generate negative feelings among Muslim Hausa speakers, the same speakers also generally recognize the high instrumental value of a knowledge of English for obtaining employment and the significant access that the language provides to outside learning. Its utility in official domains is furthermore acknowledged, receiving a 56 per cent preference from Hausa speakers in the same study. Across the broad population in Nigeria, there consequently appears to be a clear acknowledgement of the importance and value of English both for personal advancement and for the general development of the country in the area of science and technology, the economy and education. One informant, responding to the suggestion from certain quarters that Nigeria should free itself from the English language and develop a replacement for English from among the indigenous languages, expressed the following feeling, which would probably be endorsed by other Nigerians:

You cannot just be talking about emancipation from *language*. What about emancipation from (not) being able to produce the things we need? ... produce how much food we need ... produce technology. These things are more crucial to us and more important than wasting money on developing a new language ... And they're busy thinking about how they can spend money so that I no longer talk in English. Adegbija (1994: 61)

In addition to being rated fairly highly in positive terms with regard to many domains, particularly those connected with formal aspects of life, it is relevant to note that English is generally not the object of strongly negative feelings, with the exception of reactions from certain portions of the Hausa population. When speakers were asked to identify which language they had the greatest dislike for in Nigeria in a study carried out among northern and southern minorities, Igboanusi and Ohia (2001: 132) found that 40 per cent identified Hausa, 21 per cent Yoruba, 27 per cent Igbo, and only 3 per cent English as the most disliked language. There is also considerably widespread agreement on the ability English has as an ethnically neutral language to unify different groups within Nigeria, and serve as a common means of communication between speakers of different languages without encoding the linguistic dominance of either party. Ogunsiji (2001: 156, 157) suggests that 'English unites us in our diversity and guarantees our continued existence as a nation' and that 'The English language is therefore an important symbol of national unity; it is one of those things that bind

the country together.’ Finally, concerning the negative perception of English as a continued colonial intrusion in the life of independent Nigeria, a variety of studies note the occurrence of a change and shift in attitude here, and with the globalization of English and its increasing use as a second language by large populations of speakers throughout the world, English is coming to be seen less and less as ‘the special preserve of the British people, but rather as a kind of international medium of communication’ (Adesanoye 1994: 93). Earlier automatic associations of the English language with the British and colonial domination have also been further weakened by the development of a distinctly Nigerian form of English over the years, with a lexicon and pronunciation that attach the language to Nigeria, just as there are other new divergent local forms of English in West Africa, for example Ghanaian English and Cameroonian English. This being so, it is possible that the negative mental associations of English with colonial domination are no longer as strong as they might have been several decades ago, and may no longer constitute a serious and genuine reason to object to the use of English in formal domains in the eyes of the majority of the population. At the time of writing, there are no statistics available indicating the degree to which Nigerians in the twenty-first century may continue to associate English with British imperialism, and it would be an interesting area to investigate. However, one would certainly expect that the more time goes past and distances the colonial period, the fewer people there will be with negative memories of colonial rule, and currently the majority of Nigeria’s population will indeed have been born at some time well after the departure of the British in 1960.

10.6 The National Language Issue Revisited

We can now take stock of the information accumulated in section 10.5 and earlier sections, and see how this bears on the issue of national language and integration. As noted during the course of the chapter, Nigeria is a country which, having received its independence, has continually had to deal with an extremely complex ethno-linguistic configuration and set of challenges to the process of nation-building, having been forged as a single territory from areas containing several hundred different groups and no clear majority language that could naturally be used to develop a national language in the way that has occurred in more monolingual countries such as Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, and Madagascar. Instead, Nigeria contains three considerably sizeable languages spoken in total by approximately one-half to two-thirds of the population, and a vast array of other medium- and small-sized languages scattered throughout the country, whose mother-tongue speakers account for at least a third of the population. At independence in 1960, faced with a major surge in inter-ethnic and regional political competition, the pre-independence policy recognizing English as the single official language of Nigeria was simply maintained, and in the decades following on from this and up until the present, there has been an explicit lack of attention to the development of a national language in Nigeria, despite the approval of policies in the

1970s appearing to support the development of the three major languages as future potential national languages. The presence of English as an official language made use of in national-level activities may indeed have partially contributed to the avoidance of the national language issue, as noted by Ogunjsiji (2001: 158): 'because English is seen as a language performing the role of a national language the Nigerian government, language planners, linguists and so on do not seem to feel the necessity for having a truly national language.' The question is, after nearly five decades of the inherited policy of English as sole official language should there perhaps now be a restructuring of the hierarchy of languages in Nigeria and an indigenization of language at the highest national/official level, and would public opinion support such a move, as far as can be ascertained?

Quite generally, there seems to be a consensus of opinion that if Nigeria is to develop a meaningful concept of national language sourced from within its borders, this might actually need to be a composite set of the three major indigenous languages, Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo.¹⁰ The oft quoted words of Nida and Wonderly (1971: 65) written shortly after the end of Nigeria's civil war are as valid today as they were in 1971 when the country was nearly split apart due to ethnic conflict:

In Nigeria there is simply no politically neutral [indigenous] language... The political survival of Nigeria as a country would be even more seriously threatened than it is if any one of these three languages were promoted by the Government as being the one national language.

However, as time and experience since the 1970s have shown, the endeavour to promote the three indigenous languages across the nation through the educational system will require very serious long-term commitment from the government in the form of major financial support for teacher-training, the creation of teaching materials, and careful placement of teachers in suitable locations. Without such planning and resources, the necessary spread in knowledge of the three major languages will simply fail to occur, as can be seen from the generally poor results that the mother-tongue education policy has produced thus far. Any promotion of the three major languages as national official languages on a par with or replacing English in all official and formal domains will also need a massive, sustained investment of government funds, as the high costs of maintaining genuine official multilingualism have shown in countries such as Canada, Singapore, and Switzerland. At the present point in time, this kind of major expenditure might seem to be something that Nigeria unfortunately cannot

¹⁰ The possible development of Nigerian Pidgin as Nigeria's national language does not seem to have much genuine support as an alternative to promotion of the three major languages. Although Nigerian Pidgin is widely spoken and understood in the south of the country, it is pointed out in Bamgbose (1994: 6) that spreading its knowledge to the rest of Nigeria would be very difficult, given that Nigerian Pidgin has not been standardized and exhibits much variation. In addition to this, as a pidgin it is typically associated with a range of negative attitudes and thought by many to be unsuitable for use outside of purely informal domains. Consequently, there might be considerable resistance to any attempted elevation of Nigerian Pidgin to a higher, national/official status.

afford. Having suffered a drastic downturn in its economy since the 1980s, crippling the country's ability to innovate and develop new infrastructure on a national scale, now would not appear to be the time for experimentation with a new language policy poorly provided with financial support. Rather than see new national language policies fail or worse still intensify ethnic disharmony, it would seem that Nigeria is in fact realistically stuck with the inherited status quo for at least the immediate future, until the economy is rebuilt to a state where it could hypothetically bear the burden of a new national language initiative. Such a conclusion, to a considerable extent forced by external financial constraints, may not be so disheartening or desperately unwelcome, however. From the available evidence, gathered from a range of investigations of attitudes, it would appear that there are actually widespread, largely positive attitudes towards English in its occurrence as the linking language of officialdom and education, for a variety of different reasons. Though this may not assist in nation-building in the way of directly helping construct a specifically Nigerian national identity shared by the population, there are times when the optimal role of language in national integration may not be one of attempting to actively mould new forms of identity, but rather a minimization of the conflict and national disintegration that may otherwise arise through problems relating to language. While various countries at points in their history have been presented with circumstances that help facilitate the development of a shared language as a strong symbol of the nation, Nigeria, emerging from several decades of emotionally charged ethno-regional politics and competition would currently seem to need to adopt the safest possible language strategies to help secure its future as a nation built from many nations. It can therefore be concluded that, for the time being, until better foundations are created for the strong growth of a single Nigerian nation, the retention of English as official language of the state might seem to remain the best imperfect fit for the country, and that a majority of the population polled in recent surveys appears to recognize the high pragmatic imperative and utility of such a 'nationalist' rather than nationalist linguistic policy (Bamgbose 1991).¹¹

¹¹ For example, the study referred to in Adegbija (1994: 66) reports that 73.5 per cent of respondents wanted English retained as the official language of Nigeria. Igboanusi and Ohia (2001: 134) found that 66 per cent of their respondents identified English as their preferred retained future lingua franca of Nigeria, and Igboanusi and Peter (2005: 98) registered an average 68 per cent approval of English for the same status, with all non-Hausa groups approving at a rate of 73 per cent or over. Other studies suggest similar conclusions.