

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE****The Role of English Language in Nigerian Development****Ushuple Lucy Mishina**

Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages

University of Calabar

Cross River State – Nigeria

Email: [mishinalucy@gmail.com](mailto:mishinalucy@gmail.com)

---

**Abstract:** The language policy in Nigeria granted the English language the status of being the sole official language, and the language of instruction in the country. This approach influenced the educated people's competence, and subsequently, attitudes towards others within their locality and global arena. The study aims to investigate the role of the English Language in Nigerian Development. This paper argues that English as the Nigerian official language is well accepted due to the multi-lingual state of Nigeria. The study observes that English language is a political and social element in the process of building, unification, and maintaining the Nigerian state and as an essential element of national development. This study contributes to the understanding of multi-lingual nations and supports the research literature which shows that English language plays a significant role in unifying multi-lingual Nigeria.

**Keywords** Language, language policy, Nigeria.

---

**INTRODUCTION**

When we relate language and colonialism, the strength of colonial empires was dependent on effective communication between the colonizers and the colonized. For example in African, it can be seen very clearly that European powers adopted different strategies. No matter how much the language policy was imposed on the conquered population, it is difficult to deny the claims of the two. Firstly, after the conquest of the territory language became the language of the colonizer power. Secondly, the language of colonized was degraded, both physically and mentally, to the role of the slave language, even primitive language. In the period before the conquest missionaries were agents of language. Introducing the teaching of reading and writing, at the same time European languages were taught. It became a symbolic act. It was the transition from a traditional to modern society. Language has started to be treated as a powerful political instrument (Gawrycki, Szeptycki 2011: 139–142). Language can be used in many ways; one of them is in specific purpose areas such as social or cultural communication, government

decisions, political debate, media which could foster National Development (Sutton 1991: 141).

Every cultural group has its semiotic systems, experiences or values. Learning different artistic traditions or religions allows people to understand what and how they are. It involves gaining knowledge, but also an appreciation of otherness- the cultural conceptualizations- which are foundations influencing other groups' collective encounters with reality, whether it is other times, belief or values. Ideally, this has an effect of re-imagination assumptions about what is "normal" and appropriate to an enriching perspective that diversity makes intercultural awareness (Lo Bianco 2010). This is done through language. Language communicates and brings people close but frequently it lends support to crucial differences and thus surface conflicts, difficult to be managed which put the society or the nation in disharmony. Also, communicates on a common language can help defuse tension as well as a step in solving potential conflicts and conflicts. Due to the above reason, this paper tends to show that English language can be seen as political and social too for the process of building, unification and maintaining the Nigerian state as an essential element of National Development.

## **LANGUAGE AND NATION BUILDING**

Language is known to be as old as human society whereas the concept of nation is of fairly recent origin. Language facilitates social communication and helps nurture mutual cooperation. A nation is a product of intense social communication and cooperation. Jespersen equates a nation with a linguistic community. He asserts "You must understand that the world 'nation' means a linguistic unit, a linguistic community, depends always on intercourse, on a community of life." (Silverman 1995). The development of any nation will come to a standstill without a medium of communication like language. Connor & Deutsch in an article titled 'Nationalism and its Alternatives' has defined a nation as "a community of shared meanings or more broadly still, a group of people who have interlocking habits of communication." (Connor & Deutsch 1971: 661). Joseph Stalin has also held a similar view when he states "a national community is inconceivable without a common language." (Wright 2012). Deutsch has made it clear that without communication social structuring amongst human beings would become impossible. Thus he states that "The richer their cooperation in producing tangible goods and services, in developing highly developed societies, and developing and sharing intangible treasures of knowledge, art, and values, the greater their need for rich, varied, quick and accurate communication." (Kamwendo, 2010: 324).

A nation today may be of two types: a monolingual or culturally homogeneous nation or a multilingual and culturally heterogeneous nation i.e., a nation with multiple nationalities. The important fact is that whether monolingual or multilingual what is essential is social communication. As Stalin suggests, "A nation is formed only as a result of lengthy and systematic intercourse as a result of people living together generation after generation." (Kamwendo, 2010: 325). To make a nation globally competitive the study and knowledge of foreign language is important. There has been a mushrooming of English medium schools all around the world. Although the continuous use of English as the nation's lingua franca is tantamount to perpetuating colonialism or imperialism, yet

there is no alternative indigenous language that can assume the role of English. “Whoever controls the language controls the culture.” (Kamwendo, 2010: 323). Liberman states that it is impossible to think of any aspect of human culture or human behaviour that would be unchanged if language did not exist.” (Kolstø 2010: 211). This informs the submission of Isayey that “language is a nation's most obvious and most important attribute. There is no such thing as a nation without a common linguistic basis.” (Vu 2018: 29). The dominant inference from Isayey's observation is that for national integration cohesion and development, there must be a language acceptable to all in running a nation's affairs. However, as Stalin argued that a common language for every nation “does not mean there cannot be two nations speaking the same language” (Kolstø 2010: 211). For example, English is in vogue both in the UK and USA yet they are different nations.

In Protagoras' view language is nothing more than a tool of power, capable of creating civilizations and controlling them, Protagoras believed that man is the measure of all things (Bassey 2019: 130). That they are that they are. That they aren't that they aren't. What he means is that what man says makes what is be what it is. For Protagoras, to bring something into words is to bring it into being (Schiappa 1995: 220). He brings forth the point that were it not for language, civilization would not be possible. Had humans lacked the skills necessary for interpersonal communication, each man would live like animals, barely able to provide for himself all the necessities for survival. According to Thomas Hobbes, language is used, to describe the world, but also to convey attitudes, as well as make promises and contracts (Ogar et al 2018). When human beings come together in large groups, contracts and laws must be made to maintain the well-being of the population. The making of contracts is simply to ensure that each citizen in the state upholds their promise to contribute in a meaningful way, to the provision of the needs of the state as a fully integrated whole. It is easy to visualize an idealistic, self-providing utopia, where everyone is trusting and trustworthy.

However, humans cannot function together in a society with a great number of people, because, man has been known to be deceitful, untrustworthy, malicious, benevolent and sometimes violent. This being the case, lawmakers and law-enforcers must be put into place to uphold the laws and contracts, thereby upholding the ideals and well-being of the fully integrated community. In a multilingual society the problem of 'forging ahead' is of crucial importance. Among the competing languages that scramble for official status, whether indigenous or foreign, one must emerge as the official language (the language of administration and education at some levels), to unite the nation (Wright & Wright 2016). Many countries have encountered the challenge of nation-building in the face of a variety of languages. The choice of a language becomes very difficult when multiple languages coexist in a country. Sometimes colony into-nation states retain the colonial language for official communication. This is true for a country like Nigeria and also for a country like Zimbabwe. In Nigeria a great variety of languages were available but none could assume the role of a national language. “These languages”, are closely associated with ethnic identity and as a consequence are regarded as derisive rather than unifying elements in the work of nation-building” (Simpson & Oyétádé 2008: 172). Therefore Nigeria relies to a considerable degree in English (the former colonial language...) for administration, economic, social and educational purposes, and, as a

unifying factor, in nation-building. It must be remembered that no nation is an island.

In the modern scenario, this gains importance as the globe has shrunk and become a global village. Multilingualism arises out of language contact. Factors such as political annexation, marital relation, economic transaction, cultural association, educational acquisition, and religious affiliation bring about multilingualism. In today's global society the ability to speak more than one language can be a valuable asset. Multiculturalism inspires global communication and also helps to maintain political and security interests. Besides, it also helps promote tolerance and intercultural awareness. The flip side of the coin reveals that with globalization there is the fear of homogenization concerning local cultures and customs. One of the negative consequences of globalization is that popular culture is being broadcast everywhere and likewise widely imitated. The result of this is that the entire world has started to look, sound, smell, and even taste the same. With globalization, imported cultures can push out the indigenous ones - wiping out the smaller cultures and languages while homogenizing the local linguistic varieties. One such extreme example is Canada. In the early 1600s when Canada was first colonized it had over 60 languages being spoken. Now, with the domination of English and French, only one native language has managed to survive: *Inuktitut*, spoken in the Northern regions of Canada by approximately 35,000 Inuits (Dorais 2001). Language or languages are an essential means to allow people to fully exert their rights and participate in a democratic society. A contribution of multiculturalism to intercultural dialogue must be guaranteed. Languages will help man move from a multicultural society to a truly intercultural one.

## **THE ROLES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA**

One of the dominant and pervasive problems in Nigeria, and in Africa at large, is the language question. Language, being a potent vehicle of transmitting cultures, values, norms and beliefs from generation to generation, remains a central factor in determining the status or nature of any nation. This informs the submission of Isayev (1977:1992) that "language is a nation's most obvious and most important attribute. There is no such thing as a nation without a common linguistic basic". The dominant inference from Isayev's observation is that for national integration, cohesion and development, there must be a language acceptable to all in running a nation's affairs.

In Nigeria, like many other African nations, multilingualism is a rule rather than an exemption, the problem of "forging ahead" is of crucial importance. Among the competing languages that scramble for national recognition or official language (the language of administration and education at some levels), the language of relevance, from the competitors to unite the nation.

Fortunately or unfortunately, English has emerged as that privileged language without which the unity of Nigeria as a nation is mostly improbably, if not outrightly impossible. This article attempts to highlight the English language, of other functions, it performs in Nigeria, unites the country. This unifying role and its allied issues are discussed to show that the imposition or adoption of any language apart from English as the nation's official language will lead to the scenario captured by Thomas W.Cob above; and why from now till a relatively long time to come, if not absolutely forever, the continuous existence of Nigeria will be analogous to the nineteenth – century Wales, the slogan of which was: "If

you want to get ahead, get an English head” (Williams 1986 cited in Bamigbose, 1991:20).

## **THE UNIFYING ROLES OF ENGLISH IN NIGERIA**

English is the language of integration in Nigeria as our previous discussion shows. Amidst the compounding complexities of Nigeria especially in relation to the language question, the only language that indexes the spirit of togetherness is English. More often than not, activities conducted in indigenous languages are reprobated as being ethnic or tribal, except in cultural celebrations or entertainment displays. This explains why even the colonial era when English had not attained its present level of ascendancy in national and international affairs, political parties were formed in English. Though, the parties might have regional bases, the fact that they were named in English entailed their collective import. The Northern People Congress (NPC) The Action Group A (AG), the NCNC (National Council of Nigerian Citizens after the excision of southern Cameroon), National Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) etc. were formed to integrate all Nigerians and give them a sense of belonging. This trend has necessarily survived until today with all the national political parties formed and sloganeered in English. English is also acceptable to all – even to those who clamour against its irresistible dominance. It is the language that is not fraught with suspicions in any formal or literate context.

During the military regime of General Abacha for instance, there was an allegation or insinuation that the apex ruling council meetings were sometimes conducted in Hausa which the second in command, general Diya did not speak, at a time that the relationship between them became frosty. It is the only language that does not generate suspicions of having a skeleton in one’s cupboard or a “hidden agenda in inter-ethnic relationships or transactions.

English also serves as the language of nationalism, concerned with political integration and efficiency (Bamgbose 1991:20). It is the language that brings all the supposed “nations” of Nigeria to function as one mention is often made of each ethnic group being a nation on its own with the Hausa nation, the Ibo nation, the Yoruba nation, the Edo nation, Jukunland, Tivland, Urhoboland, Ogoniland, etc., as examples. But, the cohesion of all under the subsuming Nigerian nation is possible through English.

In other words, without English, the ubiquitous violent ethnic groups like Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) Egbesu Boys, the Arewa Peoples Congress (APC) Ijaw Youth Solidarity (IYS), Bakassi Boys, and other militant groups would have found more justification for desiring to secede from the Nigerian Federation. Ironically, it is also the language of nationalism. This is because the love for the country as a whole has to be manifested through the language intelligible to all and sundry, lest the ‘ethnic agenda’ be implicated. This reason accounts for why nationalists like Herbert Macaulay, Obafemi Awolowo, Ahmadu bello, Nnamdi Azikiwe had to use English language as a weapon of nationalist struggle. A nationalist is a nationalist based on expressing his patriotic views in English. If English is not used to express the same ideas for which he is known as a nationalist, he becomes an ethnic jingoist or a tribal apologist. It is the language of authenticity in Nigeria today.

As a language of wider communication (LWC), English is used for phatic

communion, ceremonial purpose, an instrument of keeping records, information dissemination, self-experiment and embodiment of thought among the various linguistic groups in Nigeria. The common linguistic basis that constitutes a requisite for the existence of any nation is provided by English. So with English as the common tongue to all the ethnic groups, the collective sentiment of belonging together despite the individual or ethnic differences is forged. Related to the discussion is the fact that Nigerian Nationalism or collective identity is stamped on national institutions through the medium of English.

## CONCLUSION

Like all multilingual nations, Nigeria is faced with the language question. An artificial contraption of heterogeneous ethnic communities and linguistic groups forcefully determined by the colonial interlopers, for selfish political and economic reasons, Nigeria has to survive despite the "Mistake" of her assemblage on common linguistic ground. Based on the well known Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (i.e. the principles of linguistic relativity (the distinctions encoded in one language), one would have expected that one of our indigenous languages of education because "the child learns better in his mother tongue and that his mother tongue is as natural to him as his mother's milk" (Fafunwa 1988:395) and more developed communities use their own languages in education and technical training (Asne, cited in Fanilola 1988: 84). But the reverse is the case in Nigeria, like many other African nations, as the colonial language of English still remains dominant as the language of virtually all aspects of national life: politics, administration, business, sports, diplomacy, communication, media, education, creativity, literacy, constitution, law, just to mention a few. We have hereby examined English functions as the language of unity in Nigeria and forms the basis of the nation's linguistic existence. For the unity of Nigeria to sustained, it is ultimately suggested that the English language must continue to play its roles.

## REFERENCES

- Adegbija, E. (1994), "The Context of language planning in Africa: An illustration with Nigeria". In Putz, M. (ed) *Language Contact and language Conflict*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia John Benjamins.
- Babatune, S.T. (2001). "English as a second Language (ESL) Phenoemenon in Nigeria". In Babatunde, S.T. (ed) *Contaporary Survey*, Ilorin: Haytee Books, Pp 144-203.
- Bamgbose, A. (1991). *Language and the Nation: The Language Question in Saharan African*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University press.
- Bassey, S. A. (2019). 'Anthropoholism'As an Authentic Tool for Environmental Management. *International Journal of Environmental Pollution and Environmental Modelling*, 160-168.
- Bellah, R. N. (2006). "Rousseau on Society and the Individual." *The Robert Bellah Reader*, pp. 181–202, doi:10.1215/9780822388135-009.
- Borsley, R. D. (1989). Language in mind and language in society. *Lingua*, 78(1), 95–98. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0024-3841\(89\)90007-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0024-3841(89)90007-7)

- Connor, W., & Deutsch, K. W. (1971). Nationalism and Its Alternatives. *Political Science Quarterly*, 86(4), 661. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2147458>
- Dorais, L.-J. (2001). Why do They Speak Inuktitut? Language and Identity in Iqaluit. *Paper Presented at the International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences*, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203552537>
- Enahoro, A. (2002). “Towards a New Constitutional Order” in *vanguard Lagos*, July, 5. Pp, 18-19.
- Fafunwa, B. (1983). Yoruba in Education” In Afolayan, A. (ed) Yoruba language and literature. Ibadan: UIP/UPL.
- Fanilola, K. (1988). Education through foreign language in Nigeria: problems and prospects”. *Alore: Ilorin Journal of the Humaniteis*. Vols 3&4 Pp. 70-92.
- Gawrycki M.F., Szeptycki A. (2011), Indonesia and Poland: Language (Foreign) Policy as a Soft Power, “*Jurnal Linguistik Terapan*”, Vol.2, No. 1.
- Grünbaum, A. (1952). “Causality and the Science of Human Behavior.” *American Scientist*, vol. 40, 1952, pp. 665–76; 689.
- Johnson, N. C. (1992). Nation-building, language and education. *Political Geography*, 11(2), 170–189. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0962-6298\(92\)90047-w](https://doi.org/10.1016/0962-6298(92)90047-w)
- Kamwendo, G. (2010). The politics of language and nation building in Zimbabwe. *Language Matters*, 41(2), 325–328. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10228195.2010.521988>
- Kolstø, P. (2010). Nation-building and language standardisation in Kazakhstan. In *Oil, Transition and Security in Central Asia* (pp. 119–130). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203457771>
- Lehmann, W. P. (1978). Language and Society. *Foreign Language Annals*, 11(1), 97–99. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.1978.tb00018.x>
- Lo Bianco J. (2010), *The importance of language policies and multilingualism for cultural diversity*, Oxford.
- Ogar, J. N., Thomas, E. O., & Basse, S. A. (2018). Ambivalence Human Nature and Social Justice. *Iranian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research Vol*, 6(2).
- Schiappa, E. (1995). Protagoras and the language game of history: A response to Consigny by Edward Schiappa. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 25(1-4), 220–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773949509391044>
- Shapiro, S. (2005). “The Rationality of Rule-Guided Behavior: A Statement of the Problem.” *San Diego Law Review*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2005, p. 55.
- Silverman, A. (1995). Language in society. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 19(2), 333–335. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767\(95\)90059-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(95)90059-4)
- Simpson, A., & Oyètádé, B. A. (2008). Nigeria: Ethno-linguistic competition in the Giant of Africa. In *Language and national identity in Africa* (pp. 172–198). Retrieved from e:\Article\Simpson\_Oyeta(2008-Nigeria).pdf
- Spolsky, B. (2012). Language and society. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Endangered Languages* (pp. 141–156). <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511975981.008>
- Storm, K. (2016). Language, law and nation-building in Georgi. In *Nation-Building and Identity in the Post-Soviet Space: New Tools and Approaches* (pp. 118–137). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315597386>

- Sutton P. (1991). Educational language planning and linguistic identity, "International Review of Education", Vol. 37, No. 1.
- Trudgill, P. (2000). Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society. *Penguin Books*, 243. <https://doi.org/10.2307/326846>
- Vu, P. A. (2018). Nation building and language in education policy. In *English Tertiary Education in Vietnam* (pp. 28–39). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315212098>
- Wright, S. (2012). 44 Language and nation building in Europe. In *The Languages and Linguistics of Europe*. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110220261.775>
- Wright, S., & Wright, S. (2016). New Politics and New Nation Building. In *Language Policy and Language Planning* (pp. 248–271). [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-57647-7\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-57647-7_11)