

Substituting the English Language through the Invigoration of Nigerian Languages: The Hypocrisy behind the Scene.

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Abstract: Nigeria is an embodiment of plurality of languages where English is no doubt a second language. The political history of Nigeria has really given verve to the use of English at the expense of the various indigenous languages. Strategically, English has been performing official, legislative, educational, commercial functions, just to mention a few in the country. Any keen observer will note and readily agree that the influence and prestige of English is second to none when consideration is taken of the linguistic ecology in Nigeria. The political antecedent of English coupled with its status as a second language has earned condemnation and dislike in some quarters. Some have argued and claimed that English has rendered some Nigerians impotent as they are ineffective in expressing their real cultural values. In summary, there has been persistent calls for the substitution of English for indigenous language(s). However, the practical step for doing this appears unrealistic and impracticable in view of some odds. It is on this note, that this paper discusses the advent of English in Nigeria, its functions, the odds against its substitution and relegation and some steps that could help in striking the balance in the use of English and Nigerian languages.

Keywords: Indigenous, ESL, language policy, functions.

I. Preamble

Nigeria is patently a product of history and this is reflected in her political antecedent. The geographical entity called Nigeria is an amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorate by Lord Lugard, a British colonial administrator in 1914 (Banjo, 2010,p.2). Based on this development, it will not be a misnomer and aberration that Nigeria is an artificial geographical creation.

What exists in Nigeria appears to be a befuddled linguistic state. The country is linguistically heterogeneous going by the presence of indigenous language that dot her landscape. Indeed, one of the problems confronting scholars and linguists is the accuracy of the number of indigenous languages in Nigeria. The actual number of languages in Nigeria has remained elusive (Odumuh, 1993; Jowitt, 1991). In addition to ascertaining the specific number of indigenous language is the challenge of differentiating between languages and dialects. A dialect could be described as a version and a variety of a language that is spoken in particular area (Bello, 1999,p.124; Yule 2002,p.227). For instance, a controversial example is, are Efik, Ibibio, and Annang dialects on the same language, or should they be regarded as different languages? If they are not “dialect cluster” could they be regarded as a “language cluster”? These are questions that are begging for answers (Jowitt, 1991,p.9).

As enunciated earlier, the Nigerian linguistic situation is one that is complex and disturbing. The existence of Nigerian indigenous languages coupled with the presence of an imported language, English, has created a kind of linguistic disequilibrium, with the latter having the upper hand.

It is axiomatic that the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern protectorates has given verve to the use of the English language in Nigeria. Embracing the English language by Nigerians then was circumstantial and imperative for survival. It was badly needed by Nigerians to be able to read the Bible as well as to acquire Western education (Okedigba, 2007). In addition to these two critical factors, in the wake of Nigeria’s independence, the irresistible desire emerged to acquire English to fill up the low cadre positions that opened up and which could be to the advantages of Nigerians.

It is germane to state that in Nigeria, some indigenous languages have enjoyed more prominence and prestige above others. However, this is not to affirm that a particular language is more popular than another. To buttress the claim that has been advanced concerning the prominence of some Nigerian indigenous languages, in the northern part of Nigeria, which comprises the north-west, north-central and north-east geo-political zones, Hausa has always been used as the lingua franca. A lingua franca could be described as a language of wider communication that is used by different ethnic groups of speakers of various languages as a common means of communication (Bello, 1999,p.130).

The primacy of a people lies in the language that they use. A language is the totality of a people because it is the expression of their cultures, mores, traditions, among others. The place of language in any

human in the society is indispensable. A human environment without language is not only impotent but also dead.

II. Statement of the problem

The outcry, displeasure and disaffection by some Nigerians today is against the continued dominance of the English language in Nigeria. At various fora, workshops, seminars, the subjugation of Nigeria indigenous languages by English has become the hobby horse. Advocates and proponents of indigenous languages in Nigeria have always used whatever means that they can employ to oppose the continuous use of English, which they affirm, is responsible for the vitiating and weakening of indigenous languages (Ipe, 2012p.16)

Based on this very development, some Nigerians have proposed outright cessation of the usage of English language in Nigeria. Since this critical issue has become a recurring decimal, it is therefore important that a holistic view should be employed in dealing with the unabating tempo that is being directed toward the promotion of Nigerian languages.

Theoretical and conceptual background

In any human society where at least two languages are used, there is no doubt that both of them will affect each other and this is what has birthed the theory of interlanguage. Citing Selinker 1969 in Jowitt (1991), the theory of interlanguage is “a separate linguistic system whose existence we are compelled to hypothesize, based upon the observed output which results from the (second language) learner’s attempted production of a target language norm.”

Similarly, the concept of interference is inescapable if discussion will be apt concerning indigenous languages (MT) and the second language (TL). MT is the acronym for Mother Tongue while TL is the representation of Target Language. On the grounds of specificity, one can refer to any indigenous languages in Nigeria as the Mother Tongue and the English language as the Target Language. According to Rasheed (2003,p.33) interference refers to a linguistic situation whereby the system of one language affects another. “System” in this context refers to the levels of a language such as syntax, phonology, semantic and lexis. The interaction of English and Nigerian languages is the basis of the interlanguage theory and the concept of interference.

III. Language and Status

The status of a language or languages in any speech community largely determines the categorisation of that speech community. In the words of Yule (2002,p.239) “a speech community is a group of people who share a set of norms, rules and expectations regarding the use of languages”.

A human society could be monolingual if one code or language is majorly employed by her inhabitants (Bello, 1999,p.129). Knowing full well that language is an embodiment of culture, it is therefore suggestive that a monolingual speech community is typically mono-cultural. For instance, Britain and Spain are two reference countries that are mono-lingual and bilingual due to the dominant use of English and Spanish languages, respectively.

A bilingual speech community is one where two languages are spoken and used (Rasheed, 2003,p.32). In Canada, French and English are languages that enjoy prominent use. This scenario equally applies to Finland where finish and Swedish are used. On the other hand, a multilingual speech community is where different and various languages are employed. Nigeria is a quintessential country that is multilingual in nature as there are many indigenous languages aside English.

The status of English appears to be transiting going by its advent in Nigeria. As noted by Banjo (1996,p.23) and Oladosu (2007) at the early days of the colonial era, English was a foreign language. A foreign language denotes a language that is originally alien to the environment in which it is so described (Oladosu, 2007). However, the linguistic situation has changed considerably and it is not arguable that English is at present a Second language in Nigeria (Soneye, 2009,p.440; Awonusi, 2009:37). It is equally germane to state that some Nigerians speak or use English as a first language (Jowitt, 1991,p.53). This development to implies that in the unforeseeable future, the number of Nigerians in this category will have surged.

IV. The Roles of English in Nigeria.

In view of the strategic roles which indigenous languages perform in Nigeria, the English language has become an indispensable tool in the growth and sustenance of the country. The prestige, influence and functions of English are unfathomable and incalculable.

The belief in some quarters by Nigerians is that English is the official language. This appears not to be so as affirmed by (Banjo, 2010,p.67). The development in Nigeria is a subterranean attempt and tacit adoption of English as the official language. By official language, the reference is that of a language that is used by government. Nigeria operates a three-tier of government system which comprises the federal, state and local

governments. All of these tiers of government make judicious use of English in the transactions and promotion of their activities.

On the education front, English has always been used as the medium of instruction in schools. Save for language-based courses, virtually all subjects and disciplines are taught in English. In fact for candidates writing public examination such as West African School Certificate Examination (WASCE) and University Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME), English is a *sine qua non*. In the case of the latter, a credit pass in English is compulsory while in respect of the former, use of English is inescapable.

In the sphere of mass communication, the English language enjoys considerable prominence above Nigeria's indigenous languages. For instance, most of dailies that are published in Nigeria are in English (Awonusi, 2009,p.78). Furthermore, in the electronic media that are national-based the airtime allotted to English is considerably greater than that of the Nigerian indigenous languages. However the situation is slightly different with state-owned television stations where there is increasing use of local languages, though English remains dominant (Awonusi 2001,p.79).

English is the language of the law-making apparatus. At the legislative council, state house of assembly and National Assembly, the language of proceedings is English, though there could be circumstances that may warrant the use of indigenous languages of the immediate community (Jowitt, 1991,p.22). In the same vein, apart from the Customary court where the language of the immediate community is used, English is the language of proceeding in other courts. Landslide judgments and verdicts are all relayed in English (Muslim, 2004,p.10)

Politically, English has fared better than Nigerian indigenous languages. It is the linguistic tool that is used for campaigns and electioneering (Awonusi, 2009,p.74). Thus, political speeches, pamphleteering, radio jingles and sponsored advertisement in newspaper, television and billboards are regular activities in political circle. Therefore, English is a veritable instrument employed by politicians to get the attention of the elitist group.

As it has been stressed earlier, the place and roles of English go beyond boundary. The language has been a source of inter-ethnic interaction and unity that is prevalent in the project called Nigeria and this is likely to be the trend in the unforeseeable future.

Nigeria's Policies on Education: The Journey so far

A discussion on a topic like this without reference to the policies that have been formulated in the annals of Nigeria will be a disservice as it is the basis of understanding the current popularity which the English language enjoys in relation to Nigerian indigenous languages.

Among the policies that had been used in Nigeria is the National Policy of Education of 1977 which aimed at strengthening the indigenous languages in Nigeria. Article 8 of policy declares that:

"In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process as means of preserving the people's culture, the government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of three major languages other than his tongue. In this connection, the government considers the three languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

A cursory look at this portion of the policy emphasized the dominance and empowerment of the three major languages; namely, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba at the expense of other indigenous languages. This is so because there is absolute silence on recognition of other languages. However, the policy was revised in 1981 but it did little in changing the opinion of the government, rather it went further to stipulate that the Nigerian child in Junior Secondary School should be made to study English and two Nigerian languages, while that in Secondary School should study English and at least one Nigerian language.

With the return to civil rule in Nigeria in 1999, The Federal Government launched the Universal Basic Education (UBE). An evaluation of the 1977 NPE and UBE indicates that there is no tangible difference except that the tentacle of the latter has been extended to the Secondary School level. While the NPE stressed Universal Primary Education (UPE), the Universal Basic Education stretched it to the first three years of post-primary education. Unfortunately, at the post secondary school education level, the prominence of indigenous languages was down played. However, at the tertiary level of education, the use of Nigeria indigenous languages has always a mirage. In a nutshell, the use of Nigerian languages is only practical and realistic at the primary and post primary educational level, at the post-secondary stage, it is non-existent save for those reading other languages as core and major courses.

The Promotion of English and Relegation of Nigeria Languages : The Crux of the matter

A fact that is impossible to conceal in Nigeria at present is the dominance of the English language and this has been generating serious concern in many quarters. Some Nigerians are of the belief that in a couple of years to come, some Nigerian languages will have drifted into oblivion. It has also been argued that due to the prevalent use of English in Nigeria, norms, traditions and customs of some indigenous languages are fast

disappearing, thereby paving the way and creating the ground for the acceptance and use of foreign cultures and practices (Ajani, 2010).

The manifestation of the use of English in some critical to sphere and domains in Nigeria is evident for everyone to see. It is pertinent to state here that Nigerian indigenous languages, no matter how weak or unimportant they appear to be, also have their distinctive functions in their respective geographical domains. As it has been affirmed earlier in this paper, Hausa is still the lingua franca in the northern part of Nigeria. It is a fact that cannot be contested. The seemingly odds against Nigerian languages are necessitated and engendered by circumstance and key players and this is likely to be scenario for some time.

To start with, it is worthy of enunciation that Nigeria is country that has a colonial history. Before the advent of English, it is pertinent to note that there were two foreign languages; namely, Portuguese and Arabic. In addition to these two languages were the indigenous languages (Okedigba, 2007; Jowitt, 1991). The presence of the British colonialist then ensure the entrenchment of the English language. At the inception, the British established schools and churches and the aim of doing these was to get Nigerians that would be able to read and write in the English language (literacy).

Owing to this development, Nigerians were ready to do anything to learn the English language. This is so because after they were to implant their political power and hegemony in Nigeria, Nigerians could not resist the temptation of identification and association with English. As it was captured by Jowitt (1991,p.15):

“Their presence (British colonialists) helped to ensure that Standard British English (SBE) combined with Received Pronunciation (RP) had the same predominance and prestige in Nigeria as in Britain.... When in the 1950s Nigerians rapidly took over senior civil service posts from the British, SBE – the Queen’s English’ – was unquestionably retained by them as the standard for Nigeria. If SBE was a badge of old administrative elite, the new administrative elite must wear it too”.

This historical scenario that operated before and during Nigeria’s independence is still not different from the present reality. Till date, more and more Nigerians are in the quest to learn the English language as this is likely to be the launch pad and platform for their success in various areas of academic and vocational pursuits. The influence of English has continued to surge over the years. No Nigerian language has witnessed this kind of development.

The premium that has been placed on the English language in the education domain in Nigeria has considerably vitiated the role of indigenous languages. It is true that various policies promulgated by the Federal Government were meant to strengthen Nigerian languages, especially at the primary and secondary school levels, at the post-secondary school education, the aim and objective of learning indigenous languages appears defeated or unrealistic.

At the post-secondary school level, Nigeria’s indigenous languages become ineffective and relegated to the background. This is a marked departure from the primary and secondary schools systems. In virtually all tertiary institutions in Nigeria, English is the medium of instruction. For candidates seeking admission to tertiary institutions, a credit pass in English at Senior School Certificate Examinations conducted by either the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) and National Examinations Council (NECO) is a criterion. (Adebajo, 2012,p.23; Mohammed, 1995,p.131). The thinking is that a student without a credit pass in English may not be effective in its usage in tertiary institutions. It is also germane to state that majority of papers that are presented at conferences, seminars and workshop is in the English language.

A major factor that has often militated against the adoption of a national language that is indigenous is absence of consensus (Jowitt, 1995,p.51; Banjo, 2010,p.34). Some Nigerians have been advocating the adoption of a national language(s). An official language and a national language are not the same thing (Jowitt, 2007,p.6). While it is apt and justifiable to admit that an official language is the instrument of use in government circles, it is illogical to assume that a national language is one that enjoys preponderant usage across a country. The concept ‘national language’ is one that is explicable nebulous. However, it is worth emphasizing that the question of adopting any of Nigeria’s indigenous language(s) as an official or national language, whatever the nomenclatures that are interpreted, has been dogged by a lot of challenges (Banjo, 2010,pp.29-34). These snags include the fear of dominance among the users of Nigerian languages, funding, politics, orthography, among others (Jowitt 1995,pp.37-44).

The effectiveness of a policy lies not in its formulation but its implementation and this appears to be the obstacle to the various policies in Nigeria. The absence of political will by governments and stakeholders to effectively implement and monitor policies has been the bane of the Nigerian nation (Okedigba, 2007). As it is reflected in 1977 NPE and 2007 National Draft Policy on Education that pupils and students are to learn Nigerian languages, the Federal Government has not really shown enough commitment in this regard. The system in public and private primary and secondary schools depicts that the English language still holds sway.

Furthermore, at the primary and secondary school settings, a pupil is expected to learn English as a subject in the curriculum, however when he/she gets admission into a tertiary institution the essence of learning

Nigerian languages in the former two schools has already been rubbished. This actually portrays insincerity and lack of commitment on the part of government.

The prestige, influence and prominence which the English language enjoys in Nigeria is largely due to the attitude of Nigerians to indigenous languages. It is the users and speakers of a language that are eminently placed to promote a language. When such a language is subject to repulsion and disuse, it is clear that it is gradually journeying into extinction (Ajani, 2010; Oladosu, 2007). Some Nigerians whose parents have anyone of the existing Nigerian languages cannot, in most cases, converse using any of the languages as a medium of communication. In fact some parents and guardians could withdraw their wards from schools where and when Nigerian languages are used. This actually portrays the dismal and precarious state of Nigerian languages and the negative attitude of their users/speakers.

If the learning and promotion of Nigerian languages is to be encouraged, the attitude of individuals and of governments must change (Oladosu, 2007). Many a time, the funding of the English language has always been at the expense of indigenous languages. The ominous signal which this portends is that Nigerian languages are less important and functional. With the poor and low funding for indigenous languages, students and teachers who have interest in any of the indigenous languages are likely to have their morale dampened. In a nutshell, funding is a critical factor in the promotion of a language and where this is lacking, it becomes difficult, it not impossible, for such a language to court potential learners and teachers.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

It has been stressed in this paper that Nigeria is multi-lingual country and that English, a second language, has overshadowed and outshone Nigerian languages in terms of functions, prestige and influence. Those who have the predilection for Nigerian languages are likely to hinge their call on their use in all spheres of our national life based on the perceived ineffectiveness of the English language. English, it has been argued, is a language that has not been able to demonstrate and reflect the “Nigerianess” of Nigeria and therefore should be substituted or relegated functionally to the background.

In concrete terms, it will be an act of disservice to assume that English is irreplaceable or indispensable in Nigeria. The Asian revolution which brought about a landmark in technological growth through indigenous language is an attestation that a country/continent can survive without a second or foreign language. However, it is germane to state that those who are in the vanguard of the discontinuation of English premise it on “linguistic imperialism and imposition”.

If there is anything that is worth emphasizing regarding the use of English in Nigeria, it is its potency and vitality in cementing together her disparate units. The unifying role which English performs is largely responsible for the sustainability of the project called Nigeria. In a country that is seriously and greatly bedevilled by ethnicity, religion, politics, among others, it becomes a herculean and demanding task shopping and scouting for a replacement of the English language. In view of the current realities in Nigeria, those canvassing a linguistic migration will need to have a rethink.

As a result of the significant position that English occupies in Nigeria at present, this paper recommends that:

- (a) Nigerians should develop positive attitude towards their indigenous languages. The users of a language are the ones that can promote and sustain it.
- (b) Key players in policy formulation and implementation should adopt a pragmatic and holistic approach in language planning and development.
- (c) An all-embracing national conference should be convened with a view to adopting language(s) that could be national in outlook (national language).
- (d) English should be given optimal attention in view of the roles that it is playing in critical areas of the Nigerian nation.

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