

Reviewing the Place of the English Language as Nigeria's National Language

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Abstract

The study focuses on the influence of English language in Nigeria being a multilingual country. English in Nigeria is seen by many as a British colonial legacy that could never express the thoughts, culture and identity of the Nigerian people therefore, the need to replace it with an indigenous language. English in Nigeria has assumed the status of a second language and as the official language. It functions both as an internal and international means of communication and it is the tool and medium of communication between different, diverse people and ethnic groups. It is so important in the national life of Nigeria since it is the language of administration, education, media, law, literature, etc. It is so pervasive to the extent of endangering indigenous languages in Nigeria. However, the 2022 National Language Policy stipulates the official status of the English Language as the national language, since choosing from any of the indigenous languages might not be the best for now. The policy at the same time declares the equal status of both foreign and indigenous languages thereby defining that all languages can be used for education, judiciary, media, entertainment etc. This paper endorses the position of the new National Language Policy and argues that to maintain a peaceful coexistence between ethnic groups for national development, provisions advanced for English and other indigenous languages should be maintained.

Keywords: ethnic groups, multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual, national language

Introduction

Language is a very important tool in communicating ideas, pains, joy, etc. among humans. Every normal human being is born with the ability and capacity to acquire a language of the community he/she is born into. A notable definition of language is seen in Lyons who reported Sapir's (8) thought, "language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas emotions and desires by means of voluntary symbols" (3). A language that one is born into forms part of his/her culture. Language does not operate in a vacuum but operates within and in the context of community or society, in fact, it is an indispensable tool that no society grows or develops without the tool of a language.

Tracing the history of the English language in Nigeria, one may observe that the introduction of the language into the shores of the country was in phases. Onyema (13) reported that the English language could have made its presence into the country as far back as in the 15th and 16th century BC around the Calabar area which in essence predates the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The Portuguese traders who first made their presence along the coastal areas do not speak much of the English language but the need of a language of communication forced them to evolve a contact language which will facilitate communication between them and the natives, the result was the contact language called "Pidgin." It was a whole mixture of several languages ranging from

Portuguese dialects of English and other local varieties.

The second phase came with the abolition of the slave trade. The abolition evolved a need to replace it with a legitimate trade and that consequently brought the British along the Nigerian shores but this time around, they became not only interested in trading but with administering of the locals. The result was the forcefully and successfully merger of once disparate and segmented people, communities and regions who were initially independent of one another.

Another phase is the activities of the Christian Missionaries who found their way into the country as a result of the colonial administration. They came with the Mission of spreading the gospel of Christ but soon discovered that they could not achieve much without making the locals know how to read and write in English language. Of equal importance is the return of freed slaves. The English language holds a central position in the affairs of Nigeria owing to the complex linguistic, and ethnic nature of the country.

Language has been identified as the main factor of ethnic and cultural identity. Many analysts are of the opinion that language is the pedigree of any society, without a language, no society will thrive. In Nigeria's case, at the wake of the independence, the nationalist movements kept on echoing the need for an indigenous language to replace the English Language i.e. if Nigeria is to maintain its pedigree. Allan in reporting this view says, "... Nigeria's nationalists, ...feel that their nations pedigree cannot be established until an indigenous language is chosen for the national language in place of the one intended from the former colonial masters" (398).

This is equally reported by Jowitt who says: "Since independence, the minds of Nigerians have been exercised by the

national language question, perhaps more in the immediate post-independence decades than the subsequently, patriotic Nigerians have argued that Nigeria should have a national language that is truly part of its culture and expressive of its identity... (12)." What then is a National language? Okafor and Ugwu define a national language as "the term used to describe a generalized language adopted by a particular country or speech community which is peculiar to them and is understood by every educated and uneducated (illiterate) member of such a country irrespective of their ethnic or tribal group (96)." This definition points to the fact that a national language must be an indigenous language which can serve the purpose of both formal and informal interpersonal relationships and this definition collaborates with Jowitt's report on the wishes of Nigerians to have a language which best suits the expression of their culture and identity and can facilitate common growth and national development. Onyema's opinion is that, no matter the importance of English to the shores of Nigeria, it remains a foreign language but not a great tradition. A great tradition in the sense it will never express the thoughts and aspirations of the people as an indigenous language would. The question and the problem is, what is Nigeria's national culture? Obviously, Nigeria does not have a common national tradition and culture which can guarantee a successful selection of a national language, therefore this ideal seems to be far from being realistic considering the cosmopolitan and complex nature of Nigeria. The socio-linguistic nature of Nigeria cannot guarantee a successful choice of an indigenous language over others, one example of a confrontation over the issue of a choice of an indigenous language reported by Allan is that of the 1961-62 Nigeria's parliamentary

discussions where the Hausa language was suggested to be adopted as the National language. The outburst from other members, especially those from the minority groups left much to be desired. In Allan's words, the following ensued:

The reaction to this proposal by Chief Anthony Enahoro (a nationalist who fought for independence of Nigeria) was utterly and widely supported by others: "... as one who comes from a minority tribe, I deplore the continuing evidence in this country that people will want to impose their customs, their languages and even their way of life upon a smaller tribe (398). My people have a language, and that language was handed down through a thousand years of tradition and custom, when the Benin empire exchanged ambassadors with Portugal many of the new Nigerian languages of today did not exist. How can they now, because the British brought us together, wish to impose their language on us?" (Parl. 1961-62: 3156-3157). Enahoro again was reported to have added the following: "We have not fought the imperialists in order to establish a new imperialism in this country" (Ibid: 3158).

Could the above outburst be out of a genuine fear of domination by others or a figment of the author's imagination? When we consider the definition of culture, Lyons offers both a social and anthropological definition of the term. He assumes that "culture may be described as socially acquired knowledge i.e. the knowledge that someone has by virtue of his being a member of a particular society" (302). But Hudson was quick to argue such a definition, his argument was that "if culture is knowledge, it can exist only inside people's head so there is a problem in studying it." The word culture can be

defined in a broad as well as in a specific sense. It could equally apply to both general and specific sense, and that is what Enahoro refers to in his speech when he mentioned the imposition of "their way of life upon smaller tribes." Culture is basically seen as the total way of life of a people, which includes their language, food, music, marital rites, religion, etc. What in essence the expressed fear is that linguistic hegemony will take the centre stage and the people whose language is favoured will become dominant in the political, cultural, religious, economic, national space. Allan views that, "Linguistic hegemony of a speech community correlates with its political hegemony within the country." Definitely, the choice of a particular language or speech community over and above others will enhance their social, economic and political status. The consequence of that will be the resentment of others which will be a divisive force strong enough to destabilize the unity which a national language seeks to forge. If any indigenous language is adopted, the situation could be likened to the experience of India and the Nigeria's civil war. Issues like these continue to put the English language at an advantage position over the indigenous languages. To further echo on the national language question, this discussion is not new neither will what the paper say is new, but this is a positional paper which seeks to add its voice to the discussion and then take a stand on the national language academic discussions.

Approach to the study

Though the study is not empirical in nature, but suitable approaches abound which can help in the discussion of the study. In the quest for a national language policy that will help in the language situation of Nigeria, Onyema (168) points that the government has been cautious of a

definitive choice of any particular indigenous language since doing so may be inimical to the mutual cooperation and existence of the nation, therefore, many suggestions have been proffered by researchers so as to help solve the language problem of the nation and provide a viable language policy for the nation. These approaches are; the status quo approach, the conservative approach, the gradualist approach, the accommodationist approach, and the esperanto approach.

This study adopts 'The Status Quo approach' in its discussion. The status quo approach explains that, the constitution of Nigeria have assigned roles to both indigenous and foreign languages in Nigeria, therefore, these languages can coexist side by side as it is currently going on in Nigeria. For example, the 1943 memo on African languages by colonial government recommends that from primary 1-3 teaching should be done in indigenous languages while English should be introduced much later as a teaching subject. Also, Ibrahim and Gwandu express that the 1977, 1981, 1998 and 2004 National Policy on Education have assigned different roles to many Nigerian languages. Nigerian languages should be used in the lower primary level, while English shall be introduced much later in higher primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Similarly, the current National Language Policy (NLP) of 2022 has assigned roles to languages used in Nigeria. This is so as to promote the peaceful and mutual interface of all languages used in Nigeria.

The status quo approach subscribed to the English language to be used as the national as well as the official language in Nigeria. This study employs the status quo approach based on its strengths than on its weaknesses. Its strengths lies in the fact that;

- i. It is neutral, which means it has the ability to avert any national tension among the diverse linguistic groups.
- ii. It is an international language; it is spoken in almost every part of the world. The English language has more non-native speakers than native speakers.
- iii. It is a national and a lingua franca in Nigeria. Meaning it is the language of education, commerce, judiciary, industrial, broadcasting etc.
- iv. It will save Nigeria from the problem of massive training of teachers as well as production of books in indigenous languages.
- v. One among the proponents of status quo approach is Chinua Achebe, who says that, we can use the English language to suit our African flavor (Onyema 168).

Nigeria and the need for a National Language Policy (NLP)

Language policy ideally seeks to help in communication problem of a nation, but Nigeria until recently has had no language policy that will shape and guide the language situation in Nigeria, all it had was education ordinances expressed in Nigerian constitution and National Language Policy on Education. For example as regards to the English language, there was no policy put in place to determine its status in Nigeria, where there are such policies, they are characterized by either practical vagueness or non-implementation. For example, the declaration that pre-primary education should be done in the child's mother tongue, another is that French language should be taught in primary schools forgetting the fact that there are no enough French teachers in the country. A third and another example is the declaration of 'official' and educational language policy of section 52 and 91 of 1979 constitution

which stipulates that: The business of the national assembly shall be conducted in English, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made thereof [section 51]. "A house of assembly may in addition to English conduct the business of the house in one or more languages spoken in the state as the house by resolution may approve [section 91]" (Butari Nahum 144). This is just a case of a blank cheque; the policies are there but cannot be implemented. The question is, when will it be approved? The government seems to lack the will power to implement its rules and decisions.

To Banjo, English is an undeclared official language, and the reasons could not be far from the master-servant relationship. Below are his words:

The Colonial government never expressly declared English as the official language of Nigeria. The tradition going back to the Roman Empire was simply assumed, namely that the colonized adopts the language of the colonizer since they cannot be expected to operate in anything but his own mother tongue. Besides, ability to speak the language of the colonizer competently confers rich rewards. So, there was no need to make a law, no need to compel Nigerians to learn the English language. But if not *de jure*, the English language is certainly *de facto* the official language of Nigeria (17).

To respond to this assertion, we can categorically say that English language in Nigeria is now an officially official language based on the stipulation of the current National Language Policy of 2022.

Tando's study has acknowledged the diverse linguistic nature of Nigeria, with each linguistic group guarding its language jealously; the result is that any attempt to choose from any of the indigenous language to serve as a national

language will be met with stiff resistance from other groups whose language is not favoured. The study laments the fact that with this obvious problem, yet there is no separate language policy that can help address such problem, what is on ground is education national policy such as that of 1977, which was revised in 1981. The aim of the paper is to investigate the pedagogical relevance of language policy and how the policy can help address the language problem of Nigeria. The paper acknowledged the significant role the English language is playing in Nigeria but that the continued retention of the English language will continue to endanger our indigenous languages, therefore the need for a language policy that will emphasize the use of our indigenous languages in education. Having understood the challenges surrounding the development of our local languages for eventual adoption as a national language, the paper adopts Banjo's gradualist approach, which explains that the local languages and the English language should operate hand in hand for now pending when the local languages would be fully developed to take over the function of a national language.

In the opinion of this study, this approach is vague and unrealistic for implementation. There is still no effort on the part of the government to reduce most of our local languages to writing system nor of standardizing it, training of teachers and cost of production of materials are other limitations to this approach. After all, Nigerian leaders are known for their lack of political will to execute and implement policies no matter how noble they seem to be. The new national language policy is a step in the right direction, which we hope will address the challenges of implementation.

Similarly, Ibrahim and Gwandu's (1) paper centre on the discussion of language

policy on education, challenges of multi-lingual education and the future of the English language. The paper explains that the language of instruction in a multi-lingual Nigeria has always been a source of concern to educators. It also traces the historical language policy in Nigeria to as far back as 1927 during the colonial era where the British Advisory Committee on native education recommends the use of indigenous languages to serve as medium of instructions. Further promulgations after the independence for example, the 1977 policy which was revised in 1981, 1998 and 2004 stipulates and assigned different roles to Nigerian languages in education at various levels. The concern of the paper is the challenge of implementation which characterizes most of the policies on education. The paper further highlights the following as some of the factors responsible for the poor or complete non-implementation of Nigeria's national policy on education; multilingual challenge, negative attitudes of students, lack of curriculum materials, ambiguity in the policy, parental factors, and quality of teachers.

The above challenges have continued to put the English at an advantage over and above the indigenous languages. The challenges will continue to be there as long as the government is not intentional about finding ways to effectively solve these problems. The paper concludes that there is need for a comprehensive language policy that will encourage the use of indigenous languages in the educational and political space, as the continued use of the English language is inimical to the growth and development of Nigeria as a whole.

Responding to this call, the Nigerian government in 2022 announced and approved a National Language Policy. Some of the provisions of the policy states that; learning in the first six years of

primary education would be in mother tongue of the community. The objective of the policy is to promote and enhance the use of all Nigerian languages. And after the first six years, the mother tongue would be combined with English language in junior secondary school level.

To respond to this we refer to Banjo's discussion on the 1981 policy on language in education for primary education where it states that the mother tongue would be used for the first three years after which learning will switch to the English language for the last three years. His study applied about three approaches to explain the implementation of the policy and the teaching of English language in primary school level. The first approach applies to the private schools where the policy may seem not to apply to them, reason being that most of the pupils in this category must have acquired English before joining school. The second approach applies to the public schools where the possibility is that most of the pupils may not have had any contact with English language before joining school therefore, this may apply to them. The third approach applies to the switch-over regulation of the policy. Two questions arise here, first is, why contemplate a switch-over to English if learning would be successful in a local language as exemplified by the Ife Six Years Program? Second is, what steps are there to be taken to make the switch-over successful and realistic? Discussions surrounding these approaches show that each of them is not without its attendant problem and consequences, as it manifest later in both secondary and tertiary levels of education. This is confirmed in Banjo's words:

Meanwhile, English language related problems have surfaced as a result of this practice, at the secondary and tertiary levels, and as we shall see later, the various attempts made to remedy

the situation. Unfortunately, these attempts are made at the secondary and tertiary levels when in fact, the root cause ought to have been tackled at the primary level (42).

The above statement means that such a policy of using a particular language at one level and then switch at another level has grave consequences. Banjo's opinion is that, if the mother tongue would be used then it should be total and complete. Issues surrounding the 2022 language policy problem may not be different from the previous ones. Just as Banjo stated, the implementation of the policy may not apply to all the categories, meaning, there are so many factors to be considered in making a National Language Policy.

Nigeria's National Language Policy (NLP) of 2022

Language policy is meant to address the language situation of a nation, especially a multilingual nation like Nigeria. Before and after colonial era, this is the first time Nigeria is having a core language policy, all it had previously were language provisions and stipulations in either the Nigerian constitution or National policy on Education. In the year 2022, the federal government of the then president Muhammadu Buhari officially announced and approved a National Language Policy. The policy is to declare and provide for the role and use of all the languages in Nigeria. The document declare the existence of about 540 indigenous languages all of which are considered equal, and these languages coexist with other foreign languages thereby complicating the linguistic nature of the country. The goal of the policy is to make provisions for language use in the following domains; Education, the Media, Information, Communication and Technology (ICT), Legislature, Judiciary

trading entertainment industry and so many others. The policy is to cover the entire 36 states of the federation (Federal, State and Local government levels), including the federal capital territory, this also will apply to all the 3 tiers of government. The policy document is explicit enough to cater for the language situation of the nation, this is by assigning roles and functions to both indigenous and foreign languages. For example, the provision for the policy in education states that:

- i. Instruction for basic education shall be in mother tongue or Language of the Immediate Community (LIC), while, Arabic language shall be used for Islamic schools. English language shall be used as a school subject.
- ii. For Post basic education, the medium of instruction for both the junior and senior secondary school shall be English language, meanwhile, a combination of the mother tongue shall be encouraged. However, students must compulsorily pick a mother tongue as a subject to study.
- iii. For mass and nomadic education, instruction shall be in the mother tongue or Language of the Immediate Community (LIC). English shall be taught as a school subject.
- iv. The policy encouraged bilingualism for tertiary education, therefore English shall be used as a medium of instruction and students will be required to pick as optional course one Nigerian language.

Policy Declaration for Government and Administration

The policy declaration in section 4 subsection 102, 105 and 106 declares that;

- i. Language choice shall be sensitive to the multilingual nature of Nigeria so as to ensure inclusiveness (102).

- ii. The policy recognizes English language (British Standard English) as the official language of Nigeria (105).
 - iii. English shall be the official and administrative language at the federal, while official document shall be rendered and/or translated into identified Nigerian languages of wider communication (106).
- a. It has the authority of government.
 - b. It serves ethnic groups in a particular socio-political area.
 - c. It is a symbol of nationhood.
 - d. It cuts across the entire strata of society in being both the language of the elites and the masses of the people.

Looking at the English language and the Nigeria's three majors (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) who among them fits into this description? Obviously, the English language fits this description considering the role it plays in Nigeria.

Conversely, Onuigbo and Eyisi argue that, "Although English is fundamental to the survival of Nigerian education, politics, law and others, it cannot serve as national symbol nor effectively serve as a national language, arguing further that, English though a strong unifying factor but it is not a Great Tradition." (38). By not being a Great Tradition means that though English serves the purpose of expressing the deep cultural African bond, it cannot carry the feeling and pride of using our own language and no matter how we domesticate the language to carry the Nigerian color, it still carries the colonial flavor.

Onuigbo and Eyisi's concern can be seen to be re-echoed in what Ajibola in Allan avers,

A country without a national language has nothing to be proud of as a nation. The failure of a country to adopt one of its languages as the lingua franca puts an indelible stain on that country's dignity as an independent country...

That is the fear and concern – an independent country should move away from anything that relates it to the colonial ties, not only the colonial legacy of the language the nation is using, for it will look as if the country is not totally free of the colonial baggage. The reality on ground is,

The new national language policy sets out to promote the use of the mother tongue in order to curb the menace of endangerment. Many Nigerian languages stand the risk of endangerment. The policy has put in place structures that can help in the implementation of the policy. Implementation has always been the bane of previous policies. Some of this structures include; research and extension services which will encourage codification, standardization, documentation, production of materials, this would be achieved through funding of language researches etc. It also put in place policy implementation and accountability strategies such as the active participation of stakeholders, establishment of implementation committees at different levels of government and society so as to mobilize political will that achieve the execution of the Language policy.

Role and Functions of the English language in Nigeria

Considering the burden the English language is carrying in Nigeria, we can no doubt refer to it as both official and a national language, the current National Language policy has put to rest the speculation about the role and status of the English language in Nigeria. But Nigerians wished that a native language be chosen to replace the English language. This is the problem this paper is out to discuss. Onyema (28) lists the following as features of a national language;

Nigeria is a complex nation. It has a complex linguistic, cultural, religious setting. Nigeria's 2023 general elections shows how divided Nigeria is along ethnic, linguistic, religious and political lines. No matter the resentment of the English language in Nigeria because of its colonial flavor, there are those who still believe that its retention and benefits is better and important for the survival of Nigeria, among whom as recorded in Jowitt are Afolayan (1984), Bamgbose (1971), etc. On their part, Akindele and Adegbite are convinced that the English language cannot be cast off in Nigeria because of the role it performs in Nigeria in particular, and Africa in general. For them the English language has come to stay, for it serves the following three functions in Nigeria namely accommodation, participation, and social mobility (61).

When we turn our attention to Jowitt's classification of Nigeria's linguistic repertoires and language functions, we tend to understand that most Nigerians are either bilinguals or multilinguals. It means most people can speak more than one language, that is not to say there are no monolinguals, and at such instance, they tend to speak only an indigenous language and for those who speak more than one language, every combination may be possible, knowing an indigenous language plus another indigenous language or an indigenous language plus English language or Pidgin. In terms of language use, studies have shown that among younger peers and educated group code-mixing and code-switching is mostly done between indigenous languages and the English language, or the Pidgin English-based variety. Therefore, Jowitt is optimistic that no matter the attitude towards the English language, the good news "is that the number of Nigerians who not only speak English but speak it more proficiently than any other language must

have steadily increased since independence. An increasing number of Nigerians moreover learn English before they learn any other language (16). This of course is as a result of parents who come from different ethnic backgrounds, and in schools either from primary to higher institutions both teachers and students might have come from different ethnic backgrounds, therefore, the only language of communication is the English language or any other indigenous languages

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to contribute to the national language question which has been on after Nigeria's independence. Allan's discussion on this matter and his suggestion is important to this study. Taking from Haruna who quoted from Bamgbose (15) say's, "... it is not language that divides but the attitude of the speakers and the sentiments and symbolism attached to language". This is to say that we are looking for the solution to our problem in the wrong direction, This paper holds that English language itself is not the cause of Nigeria's problems, but factors such as religion, politics, sectionalism, ethnicity and many others seem to be the dividing force than the English language. Linguistic diversity if well harnessed can be of immense benefit to the growth and development of this nation. Looking at Nigeria's current situation, this paper is left with no choice than to advocate that 'let the status quo be maintained', especially as the new National Language Policy has assigned roles and functions to both indigenous and foreign languages.

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