

AN INDIGENOUS NATIONAL LANGUAGE: A MYTH OR A REALITY

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ABSTRACT

The (indigenous) national language question has generated so much heat and bitter conflicts in the past that it became a divisive factor. From every indication, scholars have allowed the issue to lie low because for now, no one seems to be really interested in the discussion and English still remains our official and 'national' language. This is indeed an unfortunate situation after 45 years of our independence. This paper critically looks at the various arguments and contends that the 'dream' about an indigenous national language can still be realized for the country if our policy makers can be more decisive over some of the policy statements that have been made some of our national documents like the National Policy on Education (NPE) and the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The debate about an indigenous national language is an old one. Since independence in 1960, Nigeria chose to retain English as a language of wider communication because Nigeria has an enormous ethno-linguistic and cultural diversity which made some people to think that Nigeria is simply a nation of nations with its sub-national groups trying desperately to preserve their separate identities. This has resulted in a number of twists and turns in the nations history due to different views and reactions of scholars. Some scholars feel that an indigenous language is inevitable at this point in Nigeria's political development. The opinions of such scholars have been reflected in the national language policy. Some other scholars have advocated certain languages they consider neutral due to the dynamics of ethnicity. Others still believe that English should be allowed to continue to play the role of a national language for Nigeria. The issue till now has not been resolved inspite of the age of this language debate. What we have seen over the years is mere polemic and less pragmatic nature of the whole argument and resolution in favour of indigenous languages. There has been constant negation of all attempts at finding a solution to Nigerian's language problems. The question now is that given the stiff competition with the English Language and the apparent contradictions inherent in the Nigerian System, is it possible for any endoglossic national language to emerge as a possible instrument for fostering unity in a heterogenous setting such as Nigeria? This is the question that this paper attempts to answer.

THE LINGUISTIC SITUATION IN NIGERIA

The exact number of languages spoken in Nigeria is yet unknown. Hansford's index (1976) puts the number of languages in Nigeria at 395. Jowitt (1991) says it ranges between 200 and 400. Against the backdrop of the complex multilingual situation, language policy and planning efforts are imperative in Nigeria. Attempts have been made in one way or the other to harness the linguistic resources of Nigeria for national development. But much has not been achieved not necessarily because of her multilingual nature but because as it were, policies are made to fail because of some oblivious pit falls built into them.

Official Language: Nigeria's official language is English, which is also functioning as our exoglossic national language – a national language common to a social (cultural) and political entity.

National/Major Nigerian Languages: These are the languages that have gained recognition according to section 51 of the 1979 constitution. In Nigeria, the major Nigerian languages are Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo. These are officially recognized as alternative media of expression for legislative purposes. The choice of Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba seems to be based on the population of their speakers and their regional/ wide spread. The idea is to promote these three languages until one of them can take over from English as National/official language. The possible choice of anyone of them as the national language over and above others is what has led to so much opposition from the other and other minorities for fear of loosing their own positions of power or for fear of political domination. The question however is, which of our languages can perform such a herculian task?

An Indigenous National Language: A Myth or A Reality

Regional/Large Languages: These are languages that are used in the various regions of the country. In this case, apart from English, Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, that are used for radio and television broadcasts in these regions, Kanuri, Fulfulde, Tiv, Efik, Edo, Ijaw, Nupe, are also used.

Minority Languages: Minority languages are other languages used in Nigeria outside those already categorized above. They are autonomous and recognized but are not used at any official level or for any such purposes as those listed above either nationally or regionally. They may be used for the purpose of instruction for the first two years of primary education as mother tongues or the language of the immediate Community (LIC). We have the following examples: Igala, Ibibio, Idoma, Eggon, Kaje, Egba, Kabba Afo, Mada etc. These languages are not also often given recognition even where they should.

The Promoted Language: This category is mainly occupied by Pidgin. It is regarded as promoted language because it lacks official status but used by many public officials (Penalosa 1983). This language is also used for inter-ethnic and interstratal communication across the length and breadth of the country, especially in Southern Nigeria where it is a first and a second language for some people. The various analysis above no doubt gives us a picture that the language situation in Nigeria is complex which implies that there is going to be a similarly complex ethno-political interactions which has always been the order of the day. Many scholars have been calling for an indigenous national language that will, unlike the English language bring all ethnic and language groups into one cultural and political alignment linguistically. The big question however is, which of our languages can perform such a herculean task?

WHAT IS A NATIONAL LANGUAGE?

A national language according to (Bamgbose 1983:3) is a symbol of national oneness of the achievement of independence and hood nation. Although today, English is playing the role of an official language in Nigeria, it is important to stress that English is not our national language. A national language is supposed to be an indigenous language and not a colonial language Finland for example rejected Swedish and adopted Finnish as their national language. The Burmese too, on attaining independence from British, rejected English, to set up a local-national language. In Paraguay also, Guarani is the new national language in place of Spanish. The language has since become for Paraguayans, the most genuine manifestation of their being an independent nation, and a symbol of nationalism as well as being a powerful resource for preserving unity in the country. Another country that used their indigenous language in the public service is the defunct soviet union. It had a dynamic language policy that enhanced national development Koromo (2000) says that the country was inhabited by more than 130 distinct nationalities each with its own language. Every citizen in the USSR had the right to speak the language of his choice and to educate his children in that language. Human and material resources were generously used to develop the various languages of the people of USSR. These decisive moves in favour of the local languages added fervour to the nationalistic feeling which came with political independence at the beginning of self rule in these countries already mentioned above but this was (is) not the case in Nigeria where English was (is) retained as the language of wider communication. The language has therefore continued to dominate national life in the country doing considerable damage to national integration and cohesion. Many Nigerians feel concerned about the continued dominance of English over the indigenous languages and call for the alternation of some of its present functions in favour of the indigenous languages. For example, Solarin (1986) hopes that the English language will go graciously or gracelessly at the fullness of time. Many Nigerians do believe that the time has now come for Nigeria to break away from the shackles of colonialism (English) and adopt a national language in keeping with the Country's leadership position in Africa because as Olagoke (1982)says: "*We (Nigerians) will need to convince the outside world and ourselves that we are truly independent of Britain*". If many multi-lingual and multi-cultural nations have replaced colonial languages and have achieved national pride and ethnic unification through local national languages, it is our contention in this presentation that Nigeria can also do the same. According to Anayo (1983), Bashir Ikara, a former member of the constituent assembly some years back said that Obasanjo's reason for inserting Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba into the 1979 constitution as national languages was that it would be embarrassing at that stage of our political development to continue to use English alone. Twenty five years later, what has happened? Today, the same Obasanjo is in power. Is the national language question/debates an abandoned project? Why hasn't the national assembly brought up the issue? Why was it not one of the topic discussed in the just concluded political confab. Are we saying that the national language issue is not a burning issue? Resource control and tenure of office for political leaders are not the only issues that are trying to tear the country apart. We should remember that language unites and separates at the same time. The present regime should do something about our national language.

WHICH INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE?

Scholars are quite divided on the above question. Some people strongly believe that an indigenous language should replace English but they are not specific over their choice. Some have even argued that Nigerian languages lack the capacity to be used in technical and scientific discourse. Linguistically, it has been proved that any language can be developed to cope with any demand of expression. In the same vein, any language (major or minor) can be elevated to a national language status if it is so decided by the Country/Government. The reality in Nigeria is that our minority languages have not been promoted due to a number of problems bedeviling the possible adoption of a minority language as a national language. Bamgbose (1991:24) rightly observes when he says: *The real problem concerns how a minority language is to be spread to the rest of the population, given that the pool of speakers from which to draw training expertise for teaching and language development activities is severely limited.* Due to the above limitation of the minority languages, we shall therefore be looking at the constitutionally recognized major languages that have the potential of becoming national languages and they are: Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo.

HAUSA

The most widely spoken indigenous language in Nigeria according to Bamgbose (1991) is Hausa. Also the 1992 population figures gave an approximation of about 37million or 42.0% speakers of Hausa. Most of the states in the northern part of Nigeria speak it except in Kwara, Benue, Kogi and Plateau. Even in these mentioned states, Hausa is still being spoken except that the percentage may not be the same with what happens in the far north where the percentage of speakers in states like Kano, Sokoto, Jigawa is higher. Hausa is not only spoken in Nigeria but it has international spread and prestige since it is spoken and taken as a major language in Niger Republic and in the Northern Cameroon. Not only this, there are programmes on the BBC London and Radio Germany. Hausa today has a well developed standard orthography, usage and variety. It is due to the above credentials of Hausa that some scholars like late Dr. Tai Solarin once suggested the use of Hausa as an indigenous national language because of the conviction that English is an instrument of colonialism and mental servitude. In his argument, Solarin asserted that independence is meaningless to Countries that continue to use foreign language(s) for official and inter-ethnic communication. In a sharp reaction to the above proposal, Professor Chinua Achebe accused Soyinka of insanity, insensitivity and literary emptiness because he (Achebe) felt that the suggestion was aimed at subsuming other languages. Similarly, some see Hausa language as an hegemony of the North that is already advantaged politically. Making Hausa a national language to others mean further domination by a region that is already advantaged; so others kicked against it. In the same vain, members of the constituent Assembly during General Obasanjo's regime in 1979 at a stage refused to talk to one another and the life of the assembly itself was threatened only to be reassured by the then Head of State through the provision in the 1979 constitution that the three major languages should serve as national languages alongside English Language.

YORUBA

The second most widely spoken language in Nigeria according to the 1992 Census is Yoruba with about 15m people representing 17.00%. The language is spoken mainly in the south western part of Nigeria consisting of Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Ondo and a substantial part of Kwara and Kogi states. The history of the language dates back to the 18th Century. Yoruba is also one of the major languages in the neighbouring Benin Republic. Although, a subject of many dissertations and linguistic studies, it has not yet enjoyed the status of Hausa in international media communication. The language has a standard orthography and usage despite its many dialects and varieties. Yoruba language has not been outrightly proposed by scholars except for the fact that it has been enshrined in the constitution as one of the three major Nigerian languages. Yoruba speakers are learned men and women and it would not be easy for the speakers to accept another language as more superior to theirs.

IGBO

The third most widely spoken language in Nigeria is Igbo. According to the 1992 population figures, about 10million people speak Igbo representing 11.4%. Igbo is the dominant language in South Eastern Nigeria. It is the main language in Imo, Anambra, Enugu, Abia, Ebonyi and parts of Delta states. The language also has a fairly long history but its literary tradition is relatively shorter and less familiar than its Hausa and Yoruba counterparts. This notwithstanding, the language has a well developed orthography. Except for the constitutional provision that Igbo is one of the major languages and should be used alongside English, it has

An Indigenous National Language: A Myth or A Reality

not been outrightly proposed as an indigenous language like Hausa by scholars but the speakers would want it to be a national language instead of Hausa language. From the foregoing, in terms of relative advantages of one language over the other, one would say that the Hausa language tends to have an edge over its Yoruba and Igbo Counterparts. This is purely on the basis of its speaker's population, national and international prestige.

OTHER REACTIONS

Apart from the above, there have been other reactions and positions. According to Ajeigbe (1987), one opinionist Babale Ahmade once asserted that:

A lingual-franca cannot work in this country because none of the major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) will want to step down for the other. Infact, the advocates of Hausa as the most acceptable lingua-Franca for us must be joking, and therefore according to uzoezie (1987)... to avoid a possible unrest that might be caused by choosing a majority language, a minority language should be chosen instead.

This last proposal has also been Criticised on the ground that the minority languages too are not totally free from our political web and that they are yet to be developed. In the 1970's, during the Murtala/Obasanjo regime, *Wazobia* was also proposed to evolve a national language for Nigeria where *wa* comes from Yoruba, *zo* from Hausa and *bia* from Igbo. This proposal did not receive the blessings of renowned linguists like professor Bamgbose. Bamgbose (1983). Another proposal that came up was that of Mr. Igbineweka as reported by Bamgbose (1983) who maintained that *Guosa* could be our lingua Franca. According to him, *Nagode pupo* means "thank you very much" gotten from Hausa and Yoruba while "*Naomi hutu Uki meta*" means give me three weeks leave from Effik, Hausa, Edo and Yoruba. According to Bamgbose (1983), the *Guosa* proposal is silly because it means that we have to look for Mr. Igbineweka each time we need to form a new sentence in Guosa. Against the backdrop of the complex Multilingual situation, language policy and planning efforts are imperative in Nigeria. Attempts have been made in one way or the other as seen above to harness the linguistic resources of Nigeria for national development, but much has not been achieved not necessarily because of her multilingual nature but because as it were, policies are made to fail because of some obvious pit falls built into them.

AN APPRAISAL OF THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE POLICY

The official Language policy of Nigeria is stated in section 51 and 91 of the 1979 constitution and repeated thus in sections 55 and 97 of the 1979 Constitution:

The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English and in Hausa. Ibo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made thereof.

The business of a Hausa, of Assembly shall be conducted in English, but the House may in addition to English conduct the business of the House in one or more other languages spoken in the state as the House may by resolution approve.

A closer look at these policies reveal that they are policies for policy's sake, because they are not committal about implementation which will make it possible for Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba on the one hand and the major languages of respective states on the other, to assume the role accorded them by the constitution. The policy was silent on how or which body would make the necessary arrangement for the introduction of the use of these languages in the National Assembly. So also, some minority languages' background could not come to terms with the ascendant position accorded Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba in this constitutional provision. To them, it is a way of perpetuating political dominance over enjoyed by these groups right from the first republic. This may be the justification for this escape clause. Since the hidden intention is to maintain the status quo with the use of English. In order not to threaten the tenuous national Unity, "adequate arrangement" will continue to be an unattainable goal *ad infinitum*. It is quite significant that the preparations to usher in the fourth republic that the country is in right now took no cognizance of this constitutional provision. Now that the republic has been established, no debate of the National Assembly or political confab has focused on this. What the honourable members seem to have adopted is an attitude of allowing the sleeping dog to lie as this policy is construed as potentially explosive. In the State Houses of Assembly, the same thing goes because none of them makes use of their principal languages. This is so because the policy makes it optional for the states to use them in the way it is couched i.e "the House may...." It may therefore be argued that multilingualism is the banc of this policy at the State level too. But this can only be to multilingual states. Even those states that are linguistically homogenous and could therefore implement this policy without problems do not.

A very good example of this is the Lagos State House of assembly as reported by Guardian of Friday December 10, 1999 where a member sponsored a motion urging the House to adopt Yoruba as the official language of the house. This was profoundly and vehemently opposed by the elitists of the House. One of the reasons for the opposition according to some of the members is that the use of Yoruba in the House is capable of demeaning and reducing the intellectual capacity of the Legislators. Obviously, these so called Legislators are ignorant and are not well informed about the state of development of Yoruba language and what the constitution states. The opposition again can be looked at from the point of view of what scholars call linguistic imperialism which according to Ansre (1975) is the phenomenon in which the minds and lives of the speakers of a language are dominated by another language to the point where they believe that they can and should use only that other language when it comes to transactions dealing with literature, government, the administration of justice, etc. From the reality seen, the prospect of implementing a policy like this in the immediate future is a matter for conjecture if policy makers who are supposed to know better and guide the populace on the path of self reliance can still hold views like these. It has also been discovered that many state languages have not been developed up to the point of being utilized as (for) official purposes. This is so because it is not mentioned in the constitution steps to take to develop them for the business of the House. It then goes a long way to show that the recognition accorded Nigerian languages in the constitution is only superficial and nothing more than an attempt to preserve the ascendancy of English as the official Language of Nigeria. If the policy for instance wanted Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba or any other languages of the state, to be employed for this official purpose, definite guidelines spelling out the logistics for their adequate use would have been built into the policy statements. From all that have been said above, it is thus clear that it is one thing to have a policy, and it is another thing to implement it and make it work. This is one of the major problems that this country is facing today. We often have beautiful and 'tall' policies on paper but ugly implementation. I strongly join other critics to say we should go beyond having policies on paper to real implementation which can be possible only when we have very strong national ideology where ethnic sentiments will be subjugated for a more purposeful sense of nationalism. The realities before us again is that at the Federal level, not much has been achieved in terms of implementation but we can point to a number of significant achievements at the lower levels, i.e at the State Government levels and the level of private/organizations and individuals.

SOME LOWER ACHIEVEMENTS

The first example is the activities of the state owned radio and television stations. As a result of the desire of each state government to bring its activities nearer to the people, at the grassroots, a number of small languages are now being used for broadcasting. This has been made possible by the ingenuity of their news editors and translators who made sure that English concepts in the areas of Health, Agriculture, Economy, Civic responsibilities politics, etc are presented as clearly as possible in the languages of the local populace. A typical example is the Plateau State Radio/Television corporation which broadcasts news and magazine programmes in seven or so minority languages namely: Angas, Mwaghaoul, Berom, Taroh, Geoma, Ganye, Begom in addition to English and Hausa. (Dadirep 1992). Again, we have seen that due to constant use of some translations from English to a local language, some of the translations have gained currency and are being used across either a geo-political zone or some states. For example in the South west, expressions like "ijoba-tiwa-n-tiwa" means government of ours i.e democracy, and "owóo-gbà-má-binu" money of take-and-do-not-be-angry i.e compensation fees, have become house hold words in all Yoruba speaking states of the Federation because of frequent use on radio and television.

PLANNING FOR THE EMERGENCE OF AN INDIGENOUS NATIONAL LANGUAGE

The Survival of this country depends on the state of ethnic cooperation and an indigenous national language will be a potent factor bringing this about. Even though, there has always been the fear by Nigerians that once a language is pronounced a national language, that would mean the death of others who do not have the privilege of being chosen; but records and examples have shown that in countries where colonial languages have been replaced with local ones, there has been no threats to other local languages that have not been chosen. The question then is how does an indigenous language emerge as a national language? The following suggestions will be necessary here:

1. Since three major languages have been given prominence constitutionally as national languages, there is a need to go back to the spirit that gave birth to that idea; and make the study of these languages compulsory in our schools. Every child must learn one other language other than his. This was done before but it has been abandoned.

An Indigenous National Language: A Myth or A Reality

The fact is that if other Nigerians can afford to learn these three languages, it will be despicable of the so-called major languages not to allow one of them to emerge as the national language for Nigeria.

2. The Federal Government or various state governments should make the study of particular languages compulsory in each state for teacher trainees.
3. Government should employ and supervise the deployment of graduates of Colleges of Education and Universities in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba to the states of the Federalism where they are mostly needed.
4. Government should increase the admission quota of applicants for Nigerian languages in Nigerian Universities and provide bursary awards for students of Nigerian languages.
5. The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) orientation programme should make the learning of one of the principal language compulsory.
6. Officials of the Federal Civil Service, Parastatals and State Civil Services should be made to undergo a proficiency course in any of the three principal languages, or in the accepted dominant language in the region a criteria for promotion.
7. New entrants into the Federal Civil Service, parastatals and State Civil Services must have a certificate of proficiency in one of the principal languages other than their mother tongues.
8. Language books and material production costs must be subsidized by the governments and where importation is necessary, it must be duty free.

CONCLUSION

Our inability to take a bold step right now to seriously plan for the national language guarantees the hegemony of English with its attendant threats to national unity in the country. If we as a country adopt and make fully functional, an indigenous national language, from the three major languages, it would help us a country to express the Nigerian identity fully in its historical, cultural, economic and socio political dimensions. It is believed that much of the problems faced in trying to build a united Nigeria are caused by the absence of a common indigenous medium of inter ethnic Communication in the country. The problem of building a united Nigeria is quite enormous, but if properly handled, a local national language with its unifying potentials will prove useful in cementing unity among the diverse groups in Nigeria. The choice of an indigenous national language is the only natural course open to us as a developing nation if our independence is to pave the way for our socio-economic advancement with our cultural identity remaining intact. I therefore predict that before the end of the next decade, Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba would replace English in our national life and the choice of an indigenous national language would be a reality if our suggestions are strictly followed.

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