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Nigeria's National Language Question: A Case For The English Language

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the issue of a national language question in Nigeria. The paper establishes that language is the vehicle through which a society's cultural ethos is transmitted, while, in return, society nurtures language through its socio-political, economic, and cultural groups. Language is a means of communication through which human beings share and impart information to one another. The bottom line is that the English Language in Nigeria, more than any other indigenous language, has for decades been a mobilizer of linguistic, political, technological, economic, cultural and religious potentials toward the creation of wealth, freedom, responsibility and common togetherness for the individual and for the nation. It is this function of the English Language that makes it a veritable tool for national development in Nigeria. The paper found out that some Nigerians are pushing for the adoption of an indigenous Nigerian language as against the continued use of the English Language as a national language. The paper concludes that in the present situation in Nigeria, it is difficult to see how a local lingua franca can be adopted except by a process of gradualism. It is suggested that state governments should give serious thought to the inclusion of a major Nigerian language (other than the major language of the state) as compulsory subjects in the secondary school curriculum and by so doing continue to encourage our local languages, continue to research into them and make them as virile as possible while Nigeria for the time being concentrates more on matters of national development and the well-being of her citizenry.

KEYWORDS: national language, Nigerian, debate, question, official, adoption

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Introduction

A national language basically, is a language that has been accepted and adopted by a country as her official language (which could be foreign or indigenous). It is the language that has gained premium and popularity from amongst others and which becomes the formal, official, institutionalized and legitimate language of a country as empowered by the constitution and other government official pronouncements, as the official language of the constitution, of national debate, legislation, administration, education and judiciary, and used by the people in every formal transaction. For example, in France, French is the official and national language, Chinese in China, German in Germany, Arabic in Arab countries, English in Britain, and America.

In these countries, the citizens speak, teach, govern, trade, and transact business in these languages. The national language is always the language of the press, the standard language with a standard literary tradition in which almost all the literary activities of the country take place. In Nigeria, English is the national language.

What Is Language?

Language is a system of communication by means of which human beings relate to one another. This means that language is an exclusive human activity. Lyons portrays language as an exclusive human behavior, a means of negotiation of relationships, thus:

> "Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols"
> (Sapir quoted in Lyons 17).

If language is the property of human beings and performs social functions, then it is:

> "The product of the society which employs it, and it is employed in a continual process of recreation. If this is the case, we may expect a language to reflect the culture, the folkways, and the characteristic psychology of the people who use it
> (Albert quoted in Azuike 22).

Language is also an enduring human artifact of human culture, that is, a transmitter of the way of life of a people; their folkways, ideologies, technology, craft, propaganda, values, and beliefs (Asein and Festus 67). Azuike (15), while corroborating the above view of language, maintains that the first function of language that people readily identify when required to do so is that of communication. He went further to assert that:

> "Language is also the vehicle with which the cultural ethos of a society is transmitted while, in return, society nurtures language through its socio-political, economic, and cultural groups. That is, society provides a roof for language, for the individual, the acquisition of the language of his society is one of his badges of identity and membership in his society (15).

From the social perspective of language, it is safe to say that language gets 'recruited on site to pull off specific social activities and social identities'; and that it (language) is everywhere and always 'political'. If language is everywhere and always 'political', it means 'anything, and anyplace where human social interactions and relationships have implications for how 'social goods', which refer to anything a group of people believes to be a source of power, status, verbal abilities and technology, are or ought to be distributed. Politics then is part and parcel of using language (Gee, 1).

We can infer from the ongoing discussion that language ultimately determines what becomes of society. It is the tool through which societies are built, organised, developed, and sustained. Language holds relationships and societies together from chaos, anarchy, and collapse. The potential of what can be achieved with and through language cannot be overrated; thus, Dooga's account of this potential from the biblical story of the Tower of Babel is eliciting:

> "According to the theory of the Tower of Babel, there was a time in history of man when mankind communicated by means of a common language.
> 'Now all the earth continued to be of one language and of one word'.
> The nations of mankind settled... began to engage in a massive construction project.
> If the Babel project had succeeded, mankind would have achieved universal peace, harmony, and unity (Dooga 77).

The quotation above succinctly conveys the veritability of language in human life in all ramifications. Language, if properly harnessed, can take man in general, and of course, society in particular, to any height or level of progress or development. Language is said to be at the beginning of every culture and its civilization and, Halliday in Azuike (16) holds that the roles played by language in human existence and any society cannot be overlooked when he asserted that words and sentences do not stand in isolation and that language is used to achieve many interacting, communicating and social functions that involve referential, connective, poetic, interpersonal, emotive and textual functions.

Similarly, Ogundepe et al (29) have explained language to consist of the means with which members of social groups and societies exchange ideas, information, and other related things. Who we are and the relationships we hold as individuals and societies are determined by language. These are roles that the English Language has continuously performed in Nigeria and for Nigerians in the face of our multilingual dilemma.

As far as Adegbite and Akindele (19) are concerned, the English Language is deeply entrenched within the socio-cultural setting of Nigeria so much that it presents little or no chance for an indigenous language to displace it. The English language has enforced its dominance over all other languages, especially the major Nigerian languages. English, therefore, has gained general acceptance and prominence among Nigerians irrespective of their background and is in fact the bridge builder between and among the diverse peoples, despite the constitutional provisions for the use of indigenous languages, especially the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo.

A Brief History Of The English Language In Nigeria

Nigeria, with an estimated population of over 200 million people, is the most populous Black country in the world. Nigeria is one of the six countries that make up English-speaking West Africa, along with Ghana, The Gambia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and a part of Cameroon. Nigeria is projected to have well over 500 indigenous languages; thus, it is a multilingual nation. In the midst of her linguistic diversity, English is an official language alongside three other indigenous languages: Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba (as provided by the Nigerian constitution).

However, this is only in principle because, in practice, English is used as the sole official language in almost all official functions. A vast majority of English speakers in Nigeria use it as a second language; therefore, at the world stage, the status of the English Language in Nigeria is English as a Second Language. The history of English in Nigeria can be traced to the trade relationship between British traders and Nigerians in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Christian missionary expedition of the 19th century, and the colonisation of Nigeria in the 20th century.

English As Nigeria's National Language

Having attempted a definition of a national language, what language is, as well as the important function of language, and having considered a brief history of the English Language in Nigeria, the questions to answer are: does Nigeria have a national language like the countries cited above? If she does, what crime has that language committed that its use as a national language is being debated? English, admittedly, is foreign to Nigeria. It is the native language of the British, Americans, Australians, Scottish, etc. English came to Nigeria from Britain in her expansionist policy, in which many countries were colonized with the English language as an imposed language of colonialism.

The British ruled and administered Nigeria with English, and when they handed over power to Nigerians at independence in 1960, English was inherited and adopted, and ever since it has been used as Nigeria's official language. The debate to discard English as the national language by some 'patriotic' Nigerians is borne out of the feeling that the English Language has de-Nigerianized Nigeria for 63 years now. Other Nigerians think it has not and cannot guarantee national pride and identity since it is non-native, or that it has murdered Nigeria's native languages, so to speak. Yet others are of the opinion that it is responsible for the lack of development in the areas of science and technology, among so many other reasons why they think it should be discarded.

Insights From The Feelings Of Some Nigerians On The Debate For English As Nigeria's National Language

Many Nigerians have shared the feeling that the adaption of languages (as a national language) should constitute the least worries of a fraudulent contraption called Nigeria. The belief is that Nigeria is faced with important fundamental and monumental problems of ethnicity, tribalism, political inconsistencies, ideological incompatibility, and the almighty curse of corruption, which are more important to be redressed than language (an indigenous national language).

It is often wondered who says that Nigeria will be better off speaking one language (an indigenous language)? Who says Nigeria even wants to be in one nation before talking of adopting a common language? There is an expression of fear that if the problems mentioned earlier are not addressed, it might be that we are only postponing the doom day of Nigeria. It is not the way we speak English that makes us a mockery in the face of the world, but the way we are and what we are.

If we consider the issues raised above, we should think that it hurts our national pride most in the international face that Nigeria, one of the richest countries in crude oil in the world, and so many other mineral, natural, and human resources, is also one of the poorest and leading countries in poverty. What national pride will be there if we choose Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, or a combination of both as national language, and still, have our governors dressed as women to escape security agencies, or have Nigerians arrested, tried and executed for drug peddling, or still have Nigerians deported from Italy for prostitution or other notorious tendencies, or have Nigerian Universities closed for months, or have to tackle terrorism, or have hospitals that have become mere consulting houses where people go to die? What national pride is there to talk about in a Nigeria that has an indigenous language as her national language, but whose citizens die of hunger, unemployment, disease, and poor living conditions? What national pride to talk about in a country with leaders who steal and embezzle public funds, or where university students buy grades, or receive lectures in the open air, sitting on windows and pavements? What national pride is there in a Nigeria that speaks a native language as a national language but which lacks an acceptable international rating of any of her universities, or where people in the like of Bello Masaba marry 86 wives, or where elections or rather selections are rigged, or where the wealth of the country goes into the hands of a fortunate few? Discontinuing the use of English as a national language is not

a guarantee of acquiring national pride and identity; instead, Nigeria and Nigerians should learn to live right and do good.

Part of the debate for the adoption of an indigenous language instead of the English Language is the feeling that the adoption of an indigenous language as the national language in Nigeria means true and complete independence from Britain and America. This is what those who believe that our independence from our erstwhile colonizers is only in principle and not in practice. However, we can ask the simple question, can Nigeria boldly answer in the affirmative that she is really, truly, and completely independent economically, technologically, scientifically, etc., of Britain and America, so much so that she feels she does not need these countries and their language? Do we think that we have not or cannot achieve total independence (if we really want to) from our erstwhile colonialists and imperialists unless we discontinue the use of their language? Do we realize that discontinuing the use of English as a national language means discontinuing the use of any good thing accompanying the use of the language and going back into decades of ethnic wars of dominance?

Why English Has To Remain Nigeria's National Language For Now

The language question has been a persistent nagging problem in Nigeria for a long time now. Importantly, no human society exists without language, hence the submission of Isayev 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" (27).

The implication is that for national integration, cohesion, and development, the need for language to play its role becomes imperative. Language is said to be an action. 'In fact, we usually realize that we are doing something with words when we talk' (Grundy, 49). This means that when we say something, we do something. That is, we recruit language on site, pull off specific social activities and social identities, mobilize 'social goods' (status, verbal abilities, technology, etc.), transform them into social goals, translate them into resources, and engage in their distribution and redistribution via language.

The distribution and redistribution of wealth generated by individuals and collectively in society is the prime business of development, an end which language makes possible to achieve. Development is concerned with the just, even, and equitable channeling, direction, and redirection of potentials and resources for the creation, distribution, and redistribution of wealth for the common good, and we use language to make that possible through the talk business. If we take the illustration on the biblical Tower of Babel quoted earlier from Dooga, we will realise that at government boards meetings, in the family, in every organisation and institution, and any other venture where communication has significance, the vital role of language in ensuring that people suggest, command, order, rule, co-ordinate, regulate, decide, execute, and perform such other functions, become most eminent.

Man and culture cannot be separated; neither can culture and language be separated. Language is the carrier of, and reflects, the culture; the folkways and the characteristic psychology of its users. This puts language in the framework of national development into proper perspective as a tool for mass mobilization for national orientation, for creation of national awareness, for education, for synergizing resources and potentials for sustainable creation of wealth. For instance, the Nigerian national policy on education, recognising the key role of language, says:

> "The government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion, and preserving cultures.
> Every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment.
> Furthermore, in the interest of national unity, it is expedient that every child should be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages...(10)."

We have seen that the role of language in advancing national development has been further buttressed. Language is an important means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion. National development is possible only if there is national cohesion. Importantly, too, national development is intricately tied to culture, which is not just the belief system, customs, and arts of a society, but also the way of thinking, behaving, or working that exists in a place, organisation, or society (Webster Dictionary). Thus, if people's way of thinking is positive and constructive, if people have an organised and collective way of working, then there is bound to be development. And toward achieving this, the National Policy on Education says that language preserves cultures. It also highlights the importance of language for national unity. No meaningful development at any level can take place if there is no unity. How can there be national development in Nigeria, for instance, if the north continually lives in disharmony with the south, and the south with the west? Thus, to ensure unity for national development, language prominently comes into the picture.

In multilingual Nigeria, there are many indigenous languages that scramble for national recognition or official status. Fortunately, the English Language has risen to fill that privileged position without which the unity of Nigeria as a nation is mostly improbable, if not out rightly impossible. Factors such as political affiliation, marital relations, economic transactions, cultural association, educational acquisition, and religious affiliation underpin the socio-political landscape of Nigeria, today which reflects Nigeria's multilingualism. Many antagonists of the English Language in Nigeria will have to contend with the language situation of Nigeria, which Nida and Wonderly present:

> "In Nigeria, there is simply no politically neutral language. In fact, the division into three major regions reflects the three language poles: Hausa, Yoruba, and Ibo. The political survival of Nigeria as a country would even be more seriously threatened than it is if any of these three languages were promoted by the Government as being the one national language (65)."

Corroborating this stand, Enahoro succinctly portrays the delicate nature of our language situation thus:

> "All the languages of Nigeria have equal validity, or if you please equal lack of validity, before the law and under the constitution. No linguistic group has the right – the moral or constitutional right – to impose his (sic) language on any other linguistic group in the country (18)."

Any attempt toward direction mentioned above has grave implications, as Enahoro further observes that 'any attempt to impose any particular tribal language or languages on the country is fraught with grave danger for the peaceful development of the federation' (19).

Nigeria's multilingual situation clearly puts her at a crossroads if she ever considers the indigenous language option. This has serious implications in favour of the English Language for national development in Nigeria because 'differences between indigenous languages keep the people apart, perpetuate ethnic hostilities, weaken national loyalties and increase the danger of separatist sentiment' (Bamgbose 39).

The English Language has enhanced national development and will continue to do so in Nigeria in diverse ways. In view of Nigeria's multilingual challenges, no indigenous language has, or can, perform the role of national integration like the English Language. Many Nigerians may not take pride in the English Language because they see it as a colonial language, but I agree with Bamgbose that:

> "Of all the heritage left behind in Nigeria by the British at the end of colonial administration, probably, none is more important than the English language. It is now the language of government, business and commerce, education, the mass media, literature, and much internal as well as external communications. (26)"

The English Language has arguably helped in promoting, nurturing, and uniting the Nigerian nation because it is the only language that shows and preserves the spirit of togetherness in Nigeria. It is the only option devoid of ethnic undertones in the national life. This integrative role of English can be seen virtually in all strata of national life in Nigeria. English is the language that is not fraught with suspicions in any formal or literary context.

Nigeria is a multi-lingually, culturally, ethnically, and politically complex nation. There are diverse orientations, ideologies, and affiliations. The socio-political, socio-economic, and ethnic diversity of Nigeria has reached a point that it threatens the unity and development of the country. This worrying state is being remedied continually through the unifying force of the English Language across Nigeria's linguistic diversity. The English Language has, and will continue to be a powerful tool for national unity, national cohesion, and national development.

The English Language has wielded and will, for the time being, continue to wield a great unity and development potential in Nigeria. The English Language in Nigeria, if harnessed well, has the capacity to hold the nation together and take her to greater developmental heights. This is because the English Language is a neutral language favoured against the many indigenous languages in Nigeria, which have and will continue to engage in a battle of supremacy. A good example of the potential of the English Language is the United States of America, where there are more languages than in Nigeria, yet their greatest strength is their language (English Language) and the weakness of their languages (many other languages, both indigenous and non-indigenous).

Through the English Language, the diverse peoples of Nigeria can come together, forget their linguistic and ethnic differences, and foster development through unity. The Hausa man, the Yoruba man and the Igbo man are able to sit together at the national assembly, federal executive council meetings, stake holder's meeting of political parties to deliberate on matters of national interest without any one feeling that it is his language that is used, and developing a feeling of superiority over the others, which will ultimately impede national development.

English has attained the status of a global language (David Crystal) and no longer the possession of the British (and Americans), so that users of English are not subject to British (and, or American) assumptions of correctness as posited by John Povey. Also, since English has become a global language, Britain has lost the prerogative and control over its standardization as posited by Kachru.

Festus A. Adesunoye also asserts that at the moment, English is the world's premier language, and that there is no doubt whatsoever about that because it is the most widely spoken language. Statistics from Mathew Evans (1984) reveal that 75 percent of the world's cables are in English, as is 70 percent of the world's mail. English is the language of countless international organizations, ranging from the International Olympic Committee to the World Council of Churches. Some 500million people throughout the world learn English as their mother tongue, and a further 500-1,000,000 people, a fifth of the population of the world, are familiar with the English Language.

So, if English has assumed the status of an international language, the implication is that English also belongs to Nigeria as much as it does to America, Scotland, Britain, South Africa, India, Ghana, etc., hence the designation 'Nigerian English'. It is accepted that it is not a native language (mother tongue) to Nigerians, yet it is nonetheless a second language, and

has as many rights as native languages and should be used, if need be, as a national language, as is presently the case in Nigeria.

Nigeria claims and is acclaimed as the giant of Africa, hence her active involvement in the pursuit of global peace, which can be achieved only through mutual understanding and communication. To this effect, a persistent need for intermodal dialogue through a common language relevant for this purpose is eminent. An objective consideration of the role of Nigeria in Africa will reveal the importance of English as the national language in Nigeria, which no indigenous language can substitute effectively at the moment. Because there is no single indigenous African language that can serve the need of Pan-African Lingua-Franca, then there is urgent need for some external languages of wider communication to serve that purpose, and in this case, we must be content with using one of the already established world languages bequeathed to us by our erstwhile colonizers, and it seems certain that English will be the best and obvious choice in this respect especially for Nigeria in her position in Africa.

Many Nigerians will suggest the adoption of one of the major Nigerian Languages or a combination of both. In view of Nigeria's unique (and exclusive, to some extent) socio-cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and political background, how practical and realistic would such a choice be? The situation, in contrast to the situation in China, Germany, etc., is that it will be impractical and unrealistic. Samuel O. Assein et al bid us to recall the well-known examples of India and perhaps the lesser-known case of Akuapen in Ghana, to realize the problems that could emanate in Nigeria from such a choice not to talk of the practical difficulties of developing the teachers, the books that would be necessary if an indigenous national language were decided on at the moment. It is true that Britain, China, Russia, etc. started somewhere and sometime in history.

First of all, Nigeria should be alerted that if she discards English as its national language, she should be ready to miss steps and generations in political, scientific, technological, and economic advancement among the nations of the world by trying to develop her indigenous national language. She should be ready to invest and redirect her potential and resources to the development of her indigenous national language. It is supposed that the use of English at present in Nigeria, however awkward and expensive in other respects, at least obviates the inequalities which would be unavoidable in the use of any particular Nigerian language. That option puts everyone, so to speak, at an equal disadvantage, but does not engender the emotional response which could lead, as it did in India and Ghana, to inter-tribal and inter-ethnic frictions.

Conclusion

Let us assume that Nigeria really wants to adopt a native language as her national language. In that case, Nigeria should have a stand-by standard alternative - one that has an established grammar and orthography, standard sound system and one in which all the literary works of the country already in English, can be totally and successfully translated into; one in which all the writings, discoveries and inventions in science and technology can be translated into independently without using words from English; one which can conveniently have the world's cables, mail, computer systems, phone applications etc translated and stored into; one which has reputable dictionaries and grammar books, and which has global intelligibility. Does Nigeria have such an alternative to English, one that can immediately take the place of English?

This has vital implications for Nigeria if she chooses to adopt an indigenous language as her national language because everywhere in the country, from all echelons of society, people are clamouring for science and technology, on which, it is believed depend our claim at some future date to membership of the viable, self-reliant and developed nations of the world. To really study science and technology in Nigeria and elsewhere, a sound knowledge of English is a prerequisite, as put by Van Cott (1966), that English is the language of science and

technology and that the great majority of all the publications in any given scientific discipline are written in English. Where will Nigeria be? Challenged by linguistic diversity, are we going to use an indigenous national language?

In conclusion, let us by all means encourage our local languages, continue to research into them and make them as virile as possible while Nigeria, for the time being, concentrates more on matters of national development and the well-being of her citizenry. It is very likely that we see as a solution for now, the words of Professor Bamgbose:

> "The choice of a national language is a most difficult and delicate matter. It involves tremendous socio-linguistic, educational, and political problems. In the present situation in Nigeria, it is difficult to see how a local lingua franca can be adopted except by a process of gradualism. It is suggested that state governments should give serious thought to the inclusion of a major Nigerian language (other than the major language of the state) as a compulsory subject in the secondary school curriculum. Perhaps in this way, at least one major Nigerian language will be diffused as the first language of some Nigerians as well as the first language of many. This may be the first tentative step towards the evolution of a local lingua franca".

It is also very tenable to add in the words of Prime Minister Nehru of India in 1961 that:

> "All regional languages must be developed and promoted. But that did not mean that English should be discarded. To do that would amount to closing a window on the world of technology... Foreign languages served as a window on it, and to suppose that translations could take place was a mistake... It was no use getting into an intellectual prison after achieving political independence".

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