

Language Policy, Mother tongue Education and the Role of the Nigerian Language Teacher in Nigerian Language Education

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Abstract

The paper aims at providing the function of the mother tongue and/or the language of the immediate community in a nation state like Nigeria. The paper is important because Nigeria is a political state with many nationalities. The position of the indigenous languages of the federating nationalities is threatened by English, a colonial language, hoisted on the Nigerian peoples from the advent of colonialism. The paper therefore tries to x-ray the position of these indigenous languages against that of English. It relates the position of the indigenous languages one against the other and their collective position against English. Furthermore, it analyses the possibility of developing Nigeria and its economy in such a debilitating position and highlights the difficulty of Nigeria making progress with a colonial language. It further gives an insight into how different developed and emerging economies in the world have harnessed their indigenous languages to drive their economies. It adopts a descriptive cum survey approach in its methodology. It discovers that all major economies in the world use their indigenous languages as official languages. It consequently feels that until the indigenous Nigerian languages are accorded the official position they deserve and English demoted to the status of foreign language just as French or Arabic, educating Nigerians will continue to be difficult. If educating Nigerians is made difficult, then developing Nigeria will continue to be a mirage: the country will continue to lie prostrate with the English language as a medium of instruction in Nigerian schools. Consequently, it recommends that Federal Government of Nigeria should make concerted efforts to implement the Nigerian Policy on Education by putting visible structures in place to raise the policy from a mere paper work to a utilitarian policy.

Key words: language policy, mother tongue, education, teacher

0. Introduction

The language problem between the West and Africa can be vividly seen in the following quotation from Mbiti (1992):

In addition, there are European languages, English, French, Portuguese, Afrikaans and Spanish – being spoken with local modification, mainly in the areas of former colonial rule. French and English are the main international languages; *they are here to stay* and we might as well consider them to be African languages since they are the greatest colonial legacies we have inherited from our colonial powers, and this colonial legacy nobody can take away from us. Arabic is the most widely spoken language in Africa and where you find it you also find Islam. There are attempts here and there to foster indigenous languages like Swahili and Hausa, *but it waits to be seen whether these can have more than a limited impact even on a national level, let alone the international level.* One gets the impression that the majority of the African youth are more interested in learning and mastering a Euro-African language like the English and French than spending their energies on national or tribal languages. Whatever feelings and arguments one might privately have on the language problem in Africa, we must face facts and the reality. Some of the traditional languages are dying out, but chiefly because of the modern type of education and the drift of population from rural to urban areas (p.101) (*italics, ours for emphasis*)

This paper is a discussion on the above misguided assumption. It argues that though the English language and other colonial languages have a strong foothold on Africa, they do not remove the function of mother tongues in their natural environment. Its scope is Nigerian languages. It discusses the importance of the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community in Nigeria.

It is divided into five major sections. The first part is the introduction, which introduces it with its organisation. The second limb is the conceptual framework, which provides the definition of the operational terms in the title. The third part discusses the role of the mother tongue and language of the immediate community in Nigeria. The fourth subpart is a discussion on how ANLAT can play a crucial role in the implementation of the Nigerian language policy. The final part discusses the findings of the paper and the eventual conclusion.

1. Conceptual Definition

The following operational terms are vital to the successful discussion of the topic at hand.

1.1 Nigerian Language Policy (NLP)

The Nigerian Language Policy (hereinafter NLP) is a principled statement of the Federal Government of Nigeria, which has statutory flavour, guiding the teaching, learning and official use of different languages in the country. It is necessary to distinguish two concepts, which we will be using constantly here, namely, *Nigerian languages* and *languages in Nigeria*. Nigerian languages, *simpliciter*, are languages, which are indigenous to Nigeria by virtue of the fact that they are spoken by people, who hail from Nigeria and are legally Nigerian. Languages in Nigeria, on the contrary, are languages which are spoken within the shores of Nigeria irrespective of whether the speakers are legally Nigerian or otherwise. The Nigerian language policy affects all the languages in Nigeria in one way or the other. The NLP targets Nigerian languages. However, because of the exigencies of the moment, namely the multilingual nature of Nigeria, some languages in Nigeria such as English, French and Arabic, which are not Nigerian languages, are given official recognition until such a time one or some of the Nigerian languages mature by gaining wide acceptance to play the aforesaid official role. In other words, as long as the NLP does not produce an official language or languages, the languages in Nigeria which have been given official recognition will continue to play such official roles assigned to them.

The aforesaid non-Nigerian languages, which have been given statutory recognition, are English, French and Arabic. It is observed however that there are many languages in Nigeria, which are non-Nigerian and which are not recognised by the Nigerian statutes. These languages include all the languages spoken by the peoples in Nigeria who are either illegal alien, legal but non-naturalised persons, naturalised persons whose mother tongues are not officially recognised etc. In this class fall such languages such Chinese, Japanese, Fante, Zulu, Ewe, Swahili and all other languages whose speakers inhabit Nigeria. These languages except the first three though linguistically important are not legally recognised in the NLP and consequently shall not engage our attention here. We shall concentrate our discussion on Nigerian languages and English, French and Arabic.

1.2 Sources of the Nigerian Language Policy

The principles of the NLP can be got from the following sources (cf Emenanjo (1990, 2003), Mbah (1991)), viz:

- (a) The Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria (1979, 1989, 1999). Section 51 of the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) states as follows:
 The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, Hausa, Ibo (sic), and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made therefor
- (b) Paragraphs 270-272, pages 62-63 of the Government Views and Comments of the Findings and Recommendations of the Political Bureau (1987)
- (c) The National Policy on Education (1977 as amended 1981, 2000, 2003)
- (d) The 1989 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria
- (e) Section 55 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN). This section is in tandem with Section 51 of the 1979 constitution enunciated in (a) above
- (f) The Cultural Policy for Nigeria (1988)
- (g) The Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation of Nigeria Amendment Act (1961) Section 18(1)
- (h) The Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria Decree (1979)

Status of Nigerian and non-Nigerian Languages in the NLP

Status of Language	Official Language	Nigerian Languages	Foreign Languages
Name of Language	English L ₄	(a) Mother tongue L ₁ (b) Language of the Immediate Community L ₂ (c) Major Nigerian Languages L ₃	French L ₅ Arabic L ₅
Status in Education	Compulsory from the Senior Secondary	(a) Compulsory in Lower Primary (b) Compulsory in Lower Primary (c) Optional?	Optional

Culled from Emenanjo (1990)

From the above table, the English language is the official language of Nigeria. In other words, it is the language of conducting official businesses in Nigeria. These businesses could be legislative or judicial. In addition, it is compulsory from the Senior Secondary School Education in the country. This is irrespective of the fact that English is the L₄. In other words, it falls outside the mother tongue, language of the immediate community and the major Nigerian languages. It is the language perceived to be understood by the majority of the Nigerian elite.

1.3 Mother tongue

The table also distinguishes the mother tongue from the other forms of language. The mother tongue is the first language acquired by the child. It may coincide but not necessarily the language of the mother of the child. If the

first language of the child happens to be the language of the mother or father or both, it is the mother tongue. However, in mixed marriages, which are becoming common in metropolitan Nigeria, the child may pick the language of the mother or father. In this instance, whichever it picks is regarded as the mother tongue. In some cases, as a result of some misfortune, the child may be estranged from the language of either of the parents. It predisposes him or her to be fostered in a language environment quite different from either of the parents. The language he eventually picks up is still the mother tongue. In other words, the term mother tongue has acquired a technical meaning quite removed from the literal meaning.

We are not unaware of positions, which hold that the language of the mother or father, whichever holds sway in patriarchal or matriachal cultures should be considered to be the mothertongue. But in situations where the child's mother or father is unknown, it then means that the child has no mothertongue. This is inconceivable.

1.4 Language of the Immediate Community

The other term, the language of the immediate community, confuses some people. The language of the immediate community (hereinafter LIC) exists in communities where there is another language recognised and spoken by the communities outside their mother tongue. For instance, in the vast areas of the Nigerian Middle Belt, notably Plateau State, Niger State, Kogi State and Taraba State, Hausa co-exists with the indigenous languages spoken by the natives. In Lagos, Kogi, Edo and Kwara States, Yoruba co-exists with many indigenous Nigerian languages. In parts of Benue State, Kogi States and parts of the Niger Delta, the Igbo language co-exists with many indigenous languages of the peoples. In these areas, the Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba languages qualify as LIC. In these areas, as a result of dominance in politics, trade or religion, the indigenous peoples tend to speak the LIC more frequently than their mother tongues especially in official circles. This is at a micro-sociolinguistic level. At a higher level, English may be described as LIC in Nigeria especially for all the Nigerian languages without the Nigerian LIC. The only difference is that in the case of English, the native speakers of English are not living in our midst. It is to be freed of the LIC and secure ethnic cum linguistic freedom that is the essence of the NLP. It is also to be freed of LIC that causes bloodletting and reprisal attacks across the country today. LIC in its full purport, whether Nigerian or foreign, is a colonial or imperial language.

1.5 Major Nigerian Language

The other term Major Nigerian Language (MNL) includes the languages, whose speakers hail from Nigeria, and which have been given official recognition by the Nigerian statutes. Meanwhile, they include Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The term major has attracted the attention of linguists. Some scholars are unhappy with the term and have suggested some other alternative terms to replace them. Essien (2007) records some of the terms and their authors. They include developed, developing and undeveloped (Emenanjo (1986)), decamillionaire, millionaire and centimil (Brann, 1986), first class, second class and third and fourth class Olagoke (1982), major, main and minor Bamgbose (1992), major, medium, minor and micro-minor Essien (2003). Two criteria are however prominent in the choice of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as major Nigerian languages, namely the population size of the ethnic group speaking them and their level of development.

Even though Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba have been given official recognition as the major languages of Nigeria, it is doubtful whether the population of the speakers of the three languages is more than that of the so called minority languages put together. It is therefore difficult to consider them as major from the point of view of the census of the speaker when the three are compared to the rest (see Mbah (1993)). Furthermore, language loyalty is a major factor in considering whether a language is major or minor. Given the case of Plateau State as a case in point, the awareness of the speakers of the indigenous languages of the state is ever increasing to the extent that the current apparent ethno-religious crises cannot be entirely divorced from language domination, which is a vehicle of expressing ethno-political solidarity to the exclusion of the other languages especially the LIC. It is a truism that any people that desires to separate itself from a certain undesirable cog, whether political, religious or economic vice uses language as a major rallying point. Language is the last resort of any subjugated group of people and until such a group gets totally defeated and discredited, they hold tenaciously to their language. On the other hand, all colonisation has started with the language and a people whose language is conquered is forever defeated (Oyelaran (1990)).

1.6 Foreign Language

The other class of languages in the NLP, which is *foreign language*, refers to the other languages of interest to Nigeria. According to Emenanjo (2007), they refer to languages that can be used for international communication. The Federal Government has built language villages for them. They include French Village in Badagry, The Goethe Institute, and Arabic Village in Ngala. It is not obligatory either in the official circle or educational system. No Nigerian language can be a foreign language in Nigeria. The two foreign languages in Nigeria include French and Arabic.

2. Language Policy and Implementation

By recognising all Nigerian languages, the NLP advocates multilingualism. This policy is in line with major language policies in the world today. The following scholars recommend multilingualism Skutnabb-Kangas (1995), Emenanjo (1988), Trueba (1989) and Leena (2003). Furthermore, international organisations have made laws to the effect that the people's languages form part of their fundamental human rights and they should be allowed to practise them without let or hindrance. Some of the relevant laws are:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- The Declaration of the Rights of Persons, National, Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992)
- The Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights
- The Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity

The above laws expressly provide that every people's language must be preserved and each language must not be hounded or legislated out of existence. This is especially in view of the fact that there is hardly any monolingual society in the world today. Thus, the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights stipulates as follows:

... to correct linguistic imbalances ... and ensure the respect and full development of all languages and establishing the principle for a just and equitable linguistic peace throughout the world as a key factor in the maintenance of harmonious social relations.

Emenanjo (2007) adds a rider to the above directive principle as follows:

All languages, like all persons, would not only be seen to be equal in all respects, they would also be seen to be treated equally in all respects, in all polities (Ndimele, (ed.) p. 128)

The above contention is in line with iCarnardons (1997), who recommends egalitarian multilingualism. Egalitarian multilingualism provides for balanced relationships among languages, which are based on equality and reciprocity of the linguistic communities and of the speakers so as to give due recognition to the linguistic rights of the speakers of all languages. However, it ranges all languages against one another in striving to survive. A people that strive and succeed in developing its language will join the comity of official languages speakers. Essien in his many publications has criticised the Federal government for according recognition to any of them at all and giving them official or statutory recognition. He advocates the official recognition of all them or none at all. It is worthy of note that the NLP recognises all Nigerian languages but places priority on those that have largely developed, command a large population of speakers and have the timbre and calibre of the society that play the piper in the national life.

3. Role of Mother Tongue or Language of the Immediate Community in National Development

The most important role of the mother tongue in any society is the enculturation of its citizens within the culture of its society. So far, even though English is the official language of Nigerians, it is doubtful whether any Nigerian yet acquires it as a mother tongue. It is trite to observe that even though some Nigerian elites attempt to speak the English language to their children; this version of English is certainly not English English as we know it. The Englishes that most Nigerians teach their children are mainly literal translations of their mother tongues, which do not accord with either the worldview of the English or the grammar of the indigenous languages. This brand of language education is easily suppressed by the child's environment, which is generally Nigerian. In other words, the language competence of the Nigerian child in English continues to progressively decline as the child grows up in favour of the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment. The six year Ife project on the effect of the use of mother tongue on the performance of the Nigerian child is illustrative here. It has been discovered that the parents have little or no influence on the language acquisition of the child. The wards, school mates and the playmates of children generally influence the language of the child much more than that of the parents. The first major role of the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community is to set the tone for the child to be used to the habits or culture of his or her immediate environment

Another important role of the mother tongue in National development is in the easing of learning difficulties of the child. The Ife Six Year Project has amply demonstrated that teaching and learning is easier conducted in the mother tongue than in any other language. In the project, the pupils were divided into two groups, namely the control and the experimental groups. The experimental group was taught all subjects except the English language subject in Yoruba. The control group was taught every subject in English. In the final examinations, it was discovered that the students who were taught in Yoruba performed better in all the subjects except English than the students taught in English. This result shows that the mother tongue is a better medium of instruction than a second or foreign language. The teacher and learner are at home with the learning situation. More importantly, the language continues to be developed through the use, extension, blending and creation of

concepts in the language as utilitarian and technical register. These terms and registers, if well propagated, may complement or serve as international registers where the concepts are novel.

Ansre (1996) postulates that the extent a nation develops is measured against its ability to harness its resources productively and prudently for the beneficial and equitable distribution and use of its members. The greater the number of its citizens who actively participate fully in the harnessing of the resources and benefit from the harnessing the better. Essien (1998) asserts that one of the most important roles of the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community is the transfer of manpower from the primary to the secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy. The primary sector, he itemises consists of agriculture and mining, the secondary sector comprises manufacturing, and industries whereas the tertiary sector comprises trade, public service, art, leisure pursuits and education. From the above enunciation, it does appear that the primary sector includes the area of the national life that does not require finesse in education to engage whereas the secondary and tertiary sectors involve one form of education or the other to do well. In other words, the more one gets educated, the greater his chances of progressing successfully from one sector to the other. In the same vein, the Nigerian languages act the conveyor belt from illiteracy to literacy whether in Nigerian languages or non-Nigerian languages. Early literacy in mother tongue education makes it possible for Nigerians to adapt smoothly from the tools and materials in their environment to the more sophisticated ones introduced by science and technology.

Another role of the roles of the language of the immediate community in the environment of the mother tongue in the national life is playing the role of partner in the provision of the linguistic tools for sustainable development. This partnership is necessitated by the fact that LIC usually thrives in an area where the indigenous languages are either not developed or underdeveloped. The LIC on the other hand is a language that has attained some level of development. It therefore provides the underdeveloped languages around it the resources for development such as orthography design, personnel and channel of communication. The speakers of the underdeveloped or undeveloped languages around the LIC usually exploit its resources to develop their own languages. For instance, the Igbo language developed from the efforts of the missionaries to translate the Bible and other liturgies into it. In attempt to do this, the Igbo orthography and the first grammar books in the language were developed and from there, the other aspects of the language prospered. This case applies to Yoruba. Hausa also gained a lot from the Arabic scholars who were propagating Islam. The orthography of Hausa gained a lot from Arabic.

Ethnic identity and other unique sentiments are preserved in the mother tongue. This propensity is seen in times of strife. At any time of crisis, the mother tongue turns to be a means of exclusion rather than communication. The speakers of a given ethnic group use their language to exclude others from the information they share between themselves. This ethnic identity, namely language, becomes a shield as well as an arrow upon which the survival of a group depends. This dependence is captured by Das Gupta (1968), when he remarks that most new nations are based on the plurality of segmental groups. The natural tie of the people to their segmental group is often valued more highly than their civil ties with the nation.

The loyalty to one's language appears to grow stronger as one grows older. Most Nigerians, especially the educated ones appreciate their languages as they grow older. This fact explains why many educated Nigerians shortly before or on retirement make concerted efforts to contribute to the development of their languages. The language appears to give them image both politically and ideologically. In the Igbo language, popular civil servants especially those in academics rush to Igbo language study at old age as a platform for bargaining within the wider society. Some known scholars who have thrown their weight on Igbo studies are Professors MJC Echeruo, Chinua Achebe, Animalu, and Peter Ejiofor. They have sponsored and taken part in the Igbo language development projects. However, as Mbah (2007) notes, these converts often approach the language with some self pride, which makes them board the bus without reading the inscription on it. Sometimes they do so from the booth and though they know that they are at the back seat, they still assume that they are the driver rather the passenger. They fail to recognise the linguists who laboured in the vineyard while they were away. The trouble has been that having suddenly discovered the importance of their mother tongues, they ought to ask the landlords the state of the art before jumping into the professional ring. We welcome all who intend genuinely to develop Nigerian languages. But for consistency and unanimity of purpose, converters and returnees to the profession ought to take the necessary induction steps. This attitude, we believe, exists in many other Nigerian languages. However, of special relevance to our discussion is that the spirit of the prodigal son with which the professional returns to the mother tongue points to the fact that there is more to the mother tongue than meets the eye.

4. Role of Association of Nigerian Languages Teachers (ANLAT)

ANLAT as a professional body of Nigerian language teachers has a vital role to play in the implementation of the NLP to effectively conduce the emergence of a Nigerian language or languages as an official language or official languages of Nigeria. If Nigeria effectively produces a Nigerian official language, it will reduce the

influence of English from its present official position; make teaching and learning easier and the development of the country proudly Nigerian. The first role of all Nigerian language teachers is to teach Nigerian languages professionally. The current education method in Nigerian based on translation. Most teachers of Nigerian languages impart Nigerian languages in the student as a subject of study but use English as a medium of instruction. The result is that the teachers teach Nigerian languages from the window of the English. This approach does not include the concepts in the English worldview, which we do not have access to because Nigerians do not live in the English environment and are not native speakers of the language. It as well excludes worldviews and philosophies, which are true absent in the English world. The result is that the products of the education system are neither English nor Nigerian.

Another role is for every member of ANLAT to insist on writing all official and informal correspondences in any of the Nigerian languages. This is an important aspect of advertisement, which will force other Nigerians to read and or respond to such correspondences through this same medium and in the same language. Indeed, some may reply in the English language but the sender must insist on writing and replying in any Nigerian language. This is a very important way of forcing every Nigerian to at least read in Nigerian languages. Many Nigerians are capable of writing in their mother tongues but erroneously feel that it is better to write or speak in the English language.

The other role of ANLAT is to conduct all its businesses in Nigerian languages. To effectively achieve this aim, simultaneous translation and interpreting may be necessary. If an Igbo speaker is making a presentation, two or more other professionals should be interpreting or summarising the gist of the discussion in the other Nigerian languages. Furthermore, all its publications should be in Nigerian languages. The abstract of such publications may be translated into English if there is the need. The University of Nigeria is blazing the trail by its current revision of its curriculum to include degrees in Linguistics, Hausa, Ibibio, Igbo and Yoruba. This curriculum will produce an academic atmosphere where hybridisation, crossbreeding and the development of these languages will be wedded. Furthermore, the Igbo Studies Association now publishes its journal in the Igbo language. This effort opposes the view that it is impossible to carry out true academic exercise in the Nigerian language. It also nurtures the idea that Nigerian languages do not have the lexicon and the register capable of describing professional terms and their nuances. I had intended to write this paper in the Igbo language but having been requested to write it in English; I have had to write it in English. I think that lead paper presenters in Nigerian language conferences should be able to write their presentations in any Nigerian language while ANLAT makes the arrangement to translate the work into the other languages of its choice. Practice it is said makes perfect. And practice it is by practice that the Nigerian languages can come out of their current second rate status in Nigeria.

Another role of the Nigerian language teacher is to propagate the idea that no Nigerian language is superior to the other or inferior to English. There are politicians in Nigeria who would want to marginalise some languages to feed the ego of their own languages. Only recently, the opening of Hausa and Yoruba channels in DSTV without the corresponding Igbo or any other Nigerian language channel became a bitter issue of discussion in Nigeria. Rather than encourage the growth of all Nigerian languages, they chose only two out of the many Nigerian languages. The argument of the proponents of the DSTV action is that there is insufficient content and material for the Igbo channel. If there are sufficient material and content for all the state broadcasting stations for Igbo, what makes the sourcing of such material and content inadequate for DSTV? Measured against the NLP, such an action ends up propagating the continued use of English in Nigeria. Linguists as professionals must hold every Nigerian language sanctimonious and strive to promote it. This kind of disposition will engender peace in the country and create an enabling environment for the development of the languages and Nigeria.

5. Summary of Findings and Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is discovered that the Nigerian language policy is not contained in a single document. It is contained in different parts of other legal documents. This is why some scholars have argued that it is a de facto policy rather than a de jure one. Furthermore, it has also been shown that the language policy for now favours a foreign language, namely English. This makes it an exoglossic policy. However, it aims at making one of the Nigerian languages the official language, when such a language is successfully implemented as the official language of the country. If this plan succeeds, the language policy becomes endoglossic. The paper has given a highlight of the many sources where the language policy can be got. It has also made a distinction between language in Nigeria and Nigerian languages. This has not, to the best of our knowledge, been done elsewhere. The paper observes that Nigeria is a multilingual community and each ethnic group tries to protect its language. Some scholars have frowned at the choice of just three languages rather than encouraging the whole Nigerian languages. This supports egalitarian multilingualism, which has been advocated elsewhere. Egalitarian

multilingualism treats language as a fundamental human right, which prohibits linguistic annihilation or effacement on account of the number of speakers or the station in life of the speakers. It also discusses the functions of the mother tongue in Nigeria. After this analysis, it postulates how ANLAT can play a very important role in its implementation. The final subpart is the summary of findings and the conclusion.

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