

**Language Policy, Planning & Management  
in Nigeria:**

*A Festschrift for Ben O. Elugbe*

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## Language Politics in Nigeria

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Spurred by the melo-drama enacted by the President of Mozambique and the then outgoing Chairman of African Union, Joaquim Chissano, during the summit that announced President Olusegun Obasanjo as the new Chairman of AU in July, 2004 at Addis Ababa, this paper re-examines the contentious national language question in Nigeria. It is posited that the prolonged politicization of national language and the seemingly endless deadlock and apathy that have characterized its choice have serious implications for national identity and development. By reviewing the conceptual issues underpinning language development and national language selection as well as evaluating the suitability and qualification of the previously suggested languages for the coveted national language trophy, the paper ultimately proposes and argues for the adoption of Arabic, an indigenous Nigerian language and "the classical language of West Africa" (Fafunwa, 1974) as the Nigerian national language, based on empirical facts and logic.

### Background

In July, 2004, the mantle of African Union (AU) leadership fell on the hands of Nigeria's President Olusegun Obasanjo at a summit held in Addis Ababa. This took place after the President of Mozambique, Joaquim Chissano, had thrown the summit into apparent confusion by scoring a linguistic point of addressing the meeting in Swahili, an East African language once proposed by Professor Wole Soyinka in 1977 as Nigeria's national language, which he translated to English seeing people bewildered. It is noteworthy that Joaquim Chissano is not a native speaker of Swahili, being proposed to join the list of AU official languages: Arabic, French, English and Portuguese.

Then, as participants were trying to fathom the politics of language being played by the then out-going AU chairman, the Sudanese Ambassador to Ethiopia who announced the election of President Obasanjo cracked a joke. He noted that the new chairman's speech would also be in "another African language". However, the Nigerian president does not speak the language to which reference was being made, a language native to many African countries including Nigeria, and opted for English (*Daily Sun* 2004:11). This incident assailed this writer's conscience that the contentious Nigerian national language question can now be solved – or further problematized – and inspired the thesis of this paper.



### Introduction

Development is a term whose meaning has often been conceived within the praxis of technology, science and economy. Thus, any time development is evoked, the tendency is there to parochialise it along such indices as economic growth, increase in Gross National Product (GNP) or Gross Domestic Product (GDP), techno-scientific advancement, etc. However, development is an all-encompassing phenomenon that encapsulates political, economic, educational, scientific, moral, physical, cultural, linguistic and social rubrics with all of which total human development is achieved (Bamgbose, 1991). With respect to a nation, development, according to Adesina, as cited in Babatunde and Olujide (2003:199), refers to:

The gradual expansion of available facilities and resources both quantitatively and qualitatively so as to bring to a fuller, better and greater state. It connotes progress from an earlier to a later stage characterized with better resource allocation and utilization and greater effectiveness.

It is thus the quest of individuals, organizations and nations to attain development, a phenomenon that has to be planned for, through individual and corporate synergy of efforts (Babatunde and Olujide, 2003:201). But development is often constrained by politics, a term construed by Quincy Wright as the art of influencing, manipulating and controlling others, played when people "try to define their positions in society, as they struggle for scarce resources, as they try to convince others to accept their points of view" (see Anifowose, 1999:2). This is because politics is pervasive in any modern society and as George Orwell rightly observed, "In our age, there is no keeping out of politics. All issues are political issues" (Jones and Wareing, 1999:32).

Against the experience recounted in Essien (1990:162) concerning the trivialization of the contribution of language to national development and the 'most important' significance of language as "the tool used to define us and differentiate us from the next person" (Leong, 1997:413), this paper re-investigates the language question in Nigeria. It diachronically reviews the Nigerian linguistic ecology and the discordant tunes that characterize the choice or selection of a national language. The paper contends that development will still remain a mirage, finding its relevance only in *tales from Arabian nights*, as long as language is made to be "a ready scapegoat" (Elugbe, 1990:13) and the popular attitude associated with it aligns with "the curse of Babel" (Bamgbose, 1991:2). By highlighting the pitfalls of the earlier proposals for the national language status in Nigeria, the paper ultimately suggests and argues for Arabic, whose unequalled qualities and desirability have eluded the previous proposals and which the Nigerian president was once expected to speak to demonstrate Africanness in an AU summit (*Daily Sun*, 2004:11), as the Nigerian national language.



### Language and Politics Conceptualized

Both language and politics are central to human existence as they constitute the basis of beingness for individuals and societies. This is so because of all creatures in the entire creation, it is only human beings that possess the faculty of language and it is they alone that 'play politics'. While it may be contended that other creatures too communicate, their systems of communication are not linguistic and it is difficult to engage in a meaningful discourse with a talking bird. It is also crucial to note that some creatures have excellent socio-political systems (e.g. termites, ants, etc) through which they organize themselves, yet such systems are innate and intuitive, and as such, they cannot be said to 'play politics' [politics meaning "activities of people in a group, organization, etc that are concerned with gaining personal advantage" (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 1995:1090)]. Thus, two distinctive features of human beings are that they are *homo loquens* (i.e. "talking beings" not just *homo sapiens*) and they are *homos politicus* (i.e. "political animals"). Indeed Aristotle had begun his famous book, *Politics* with the assertion that "man is by nature a political animal".

Edward Sapir, a foremost language scholar, had defined language as "a purely human, non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols" (Crystal, 1997:400) while Leonard Bloomfield, another linguist of no mean status, construes it as the "totality of utterances that can be made in a speech community (cited in Chomsky, 1986:16). The same language is defined by Adedimeji (2002:3) as "a system of signs, verbal or non-verbal, through which human beings in their varying cultures and contexts exchange ideas and communicate feelings".

Language is by far one of the man's greatest, most complex and most enigmatic possessions, the quintessence of his humanity, without which individuals and nations lose their mental and cultural heritage (Essien, 1990:168). Still on the nature of language and how it affects us, Colin Cherry expresses it succinctly:

Language makes a hard mistress and we are all her slaves. It is difficult to exaggerate the influence which she exerts upon our lives, yet, she is aloof and mysterious. Anyone who would consort with her, to study and understand her, lays himself open to a severe discipline and much disappointment (Adekunle, 1990:240).

Politics, on the other hand, concerns "ideas and activities that are concerned with the gaining and using of power." (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 1995:1090). While Harold Lasswell construes politics as "who gets what when and how", Vernon Dyke maintains it is a struggle among actors pursuing conflicting desires on public issues (Anifowose, 1999:1-2). William Bluhm (1965:5) asserts that politics is a social process characterized by activity involving rivalry and cooperation in the exercise of power and culminating in the making of decisions for a group.



Politics thus by nature exists wherever power relationship or conflict situations exist. Indeed, politics encapsulates everything that is done in life, including everyday decisions.

Language and politics can be seen in their closest possible light from the viewpoint of power. Both language and politics possess enormous power. The power of language is a phenomenon that people often underestimate. As Leong (1997:413) correctly observes, it is the one thing that allows people to communicate with each other, to be understood, to be heard as it has "the ability to heal or to harm, to praise or belittle, to promote peace or even glorify hate". Similarly, "politics is concerned with power: the power to make decisions, to control resources, to control other people's behaviour and often to control their values" (Jones and Wareing, 1999:32). Indeed men are engaged in politics as they try to define their positions in society, as they struggle for scarce resources, and as they try to convince others to accept their points of view (Anifowose, 1999:1).

It is evident that politics can be mediated by language to achieve democracy, development, peace and every positivity. Wars, conflict and anarchy still persist in human societies as a result of failing to use language appropriately. The observation of Simeon Potter (see Watson and Hill, 1993:169) is here relevant:

Men frequently find themselves at cross-purposes with one another because they persist in using words (i.e. language) in different senses. Their long arguments emit more heat than light because their conception of the point of issue, whether Marxism, democracy, capitalism... progress or what not are by no means identical. From heedless sloth, or sheer lack of intelligence, men do not trouble to clarify their conceptions.

In essence, language and politics are birds of a feather. There cannot be language except within a political context and there cannot be politics without language. But when language issues are unnecessarily politicized, such as the case is in Nigeria, and effort on language is myopically considered as 'a waste of time, energy and resources' and as such, irrelevant to development (Essien, 1981:9), the "human/national essence" has been undermined and the road to any meaningful development, be it social, political, economic, educational, etc. is effectively blocked since "the dawn of independence" (Igboanusi and Ohia, 2001:127).

#### Tracing the History of National Language in Nigeria

In line with Isayev's (1977:92) thesis that language is a nation's most obvious and most important attribute and that there is no nation without a common linguistic basis, the need had always been felt for the choice of a national language in Nigeria. As early as 1961, the issue of national language question had attracted the attention of the Nigerian parliament because of its grave importance to national identity and unity. But rather than considering what was rather linguistic, the speakers of

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minority languages mounted a stiff political opposition against the adoption of any or all of the major languages (Bamgbose, 1993:4). To give peace a chance, the debate had to be dropped and sheer politics thwarted what could have launched the infant nation into the pathway to development.

Solarin (1965) arguably the first scholar to address the language question makes a strong case for the adoption of at least a native language such as Hausa as the Nigerian national language. He cites the case of Israel, which adopted Hebrew as her national language despite the fact that none of the 1,500,000 Jews who migrated to the occupied land in 1947 spoke it, for the simple reason that Hebrew is native. He also provides statistical figures to appreciate the Indian adoption of Hindi as a national language among many Indian languages shortly after independence, as he makes further references to USSR and Denmark that took similar steps. While he bemoans the Nigerian lingua franca, 'English' as a national shame, he confidently makes a prediction that eventually failed to materialize, not only before his death but thirty years now beyond the given date:

Our Winston Churchill in the House of Assembly in Kaduna is going to conduct his debate in Hausa; that of Enugu in Ibo; the one for Benin in Edo; the one for Ibadan in musician Yoruba; whilst the one for our House of Representatives in Lagos will be in Hausa. It is all going to be in my life time. Because we are such a casual lot, I put down 1975 for the total realization. Were we a militant people, I should have put us down for 1970.

When the Constituent Assembly was convoked in 1977-78, during the regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo, the language question also arose. The proposal to use the three major Nigerian languages as media for National Assembly business was vehemently opposed by the speakers of other languages at that Constituent Assembly (Jibril, 1990:111), despite the fact that the three, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, had been used as official media of communication since the colonial days and their language development status was higher than that of other languages. Politics would have ultimately hampered the official recognition of these three indigenous languages in the 1979 Constitution if not for the efforts of Dr. Bashir Ikara. His moves succeeded and the Supreme Military Council inserted the provision in the Constitution disregarding its earlier rejection by the Constituent Assembly. While the Constitution still gave English a pride of place, at least, there was an official backing for the eventual emergence of the national language from at least one of the languages as the following extracts show:

The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, and in Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba when adequate preparations have been made thereof (Section 51, *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*, 1979).



The business of a (state) House 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 (Section 91, Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1979).

These constitutional provisions have thus informed the National Policy on Education, (FRN, 1981) which remains the most comprehensive and explicit document from which the language policy statement can be found. According to the Policy (FRN, 1981:13), Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community and at a later stage, the English language. The efforts expended in the development of legislative terms in the three Nigerian languages were thwarted by the abrupt Military interruption of the Nigerian second republic in 1983.

The language policy maintained its status quo for many years, even after the Constituent Assembly deliberations of 1987/1988 and in 1990, in faithfulness to the National Policy on Education until 1998 when the National Policy on Education was revised to accommodate French, a foreign language, as thus:

For smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria and it shall be compulsory in schools (p. 9).

Before the adoption of French as the second official language, there had been deliberate attempts to play some politics with language, with Arabic being the victim. French is not native to Nigeria or West Africa or even Africa. It is a foreign language in all ramifications, yet it succeeded in clinging the official language status, thereby beating Arabic with which it had been contrived as a close competitor.

It is interesting to note that attempts had been made to distort the language status of Arabic and even lie against it. For example, Sofunke (1990:44) dichotomizes Nigeria into Arabic-Islamic and Euro-Christian civilizations to give Arabic a 'linguistic stigma' but fails to identify 'Anglo-Christian' term. The implication of this distortion is the disqualification of Arabic or any language associated with the 'Islamic North' while disregarding the historical truth that Arabic is to Islam what English is to Christianity in Nigeria. Williamson (1990:119) also classifies Arabic (truly) as "the language of the Quran; of worship, and of the Islamic tradition of learning". But there is no acknowledgement, a conspiracy of silence, on that English too is the language of the Bible, of worship and of the Christian tradition of learning", which it is – as far as Nigeria is concerned (cf. Fafunwa, 1974:81). Adegbija (1994a:151) also talks of "Hausa-speaking Muslims... speaking (of)... Arabic (the vehicle of Islam)... with fanatical zeal in homes, schools, mosques, and even government offices and functions" for effect.



Apart from the religious associationism that Arabic is made to suffer to achieve unfavourable attitudinal patterning, there is also the theory of denial of its indigenous status. Though Arabic is "a major indigenous African language" (Bangbose, 1991:29) and "is in many respects the classical language of Western Africa" (Dike, 1966, Fafunwa, 1974:55) and is spoken as a first language among an ethnic group in Nigeria, hence a Nigerian language (Abubakre, 1988:185; Jibril, 1990:115), it is often classified as "foreign" by our scholars (Agheyisi, 1984:237). Thus, it is to Babajide (2001:8-9) a foreign language that "goes with Islamic religion" and another foreign language like French, German, and Russian to Ogunsiji (2001:154), who also considers it an exoglossic language, with English and French (p. 159). It beats one's imagination why the fact that Arabic is a "Nigerian language spoken in a part of Borno State" (AbdulRaheem, 2004:3) is concealed and distorted by many language scholars leading to the confusion of the policy makers. The case of Arabic is a classical example of the politics of language in Nigeria which exhibits a three pronged feature of opposition, misrepresentation and outright denial or exclusion.

#### Confronting the National Language Question

Linguistic diversity and its accompanying multilingualism characterize Nigeria, which has documented 394 languages, approximately 400, even though the figure is deemed higher (Elugbe, 1990:11). In this type of situation, the issue of assigning roles to languages becomes crucial so as to advance the frontiers of development. A national language is very necessary because it fosters unity, expresses national pride and independence, enhances and promotes communicative competence in "officialese" or bureaucratic language, and it promotes socio-economic as well as commercial activities (Awonusi, 1985:26; Adegbija, 1994b:6). The language(s) the nation adopts from the myriad of choices available thus engenders the national language question, which has been very controversial in Nigeria. It has been controversial only because polemicizations have more often than not been made to accentuate the sentiments of the proponents and their critics.

A national language can be defined in three perspectives. It is a language that is native or indigenous to a country. It is also a language that is constitutionally or officially recognized by government as a rallying point for national identity (which Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba exemplify in Nigeria). And it is a language that has a nationwide geographical spread in a country (like Swahili in Tanzania) (Elugbe, 1990:10; Adegbija, 1994b:4). In Nigeria, it has been alleged that the reason for which the General Obasanjo Administration officially classified Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as national languages in the 1979 Constitution, despite the opposition of the Constituent Assembly, was that using English alone at that stage of the Nigerian political development is a national embarrassment (Amayo, 1983:11). As a result of the foregoing, English is not a national language in Nigeria and to claim that "there is no gainsaying the fact that English has become a Nigerian language" (Akindele and



Adegbite 2000:46) begs the question of what a Nigerian language is. English is only an official language and it can only be a Nigerian language, it must be emphasized when an English ethnic group evolves in Nigeria, which is not so at the moment.

The characteristics of a national language have been documented in literature. Most scholars agree with Fasold's (1984:77) criteria of national language being (a) emblem of national oneness and identity (b) widely used for some everyday purposes (c) widely and fluently spoken within a country (d) the major candidate for such a role, since there is no alternative language equally qualified within the country (e) acceptable as a symbol of authenticity and (f) having a link with the glorious past (Adegbija, 1994b:5; Shobomehin, 2002:14; Adedimeji, 2004:3). Another criterion added is 'political neutrality' first suggested by Joshua Fishman (Osaji, 1979; Shobomehin, 2002) though this has been flawed on the premise that no language is in the real sense politically neutral in Nigeria and is therefore wrong as a criterion (Nida and Wonderly, 1971:65; Sofunke, 1990:45).

Bamgbose (1991:19) maintains that certain factors have to be considered in deciding on languages to serve in official or national capacity. Among these factors are nationalism versus nationism, vertical integration, acceptability, population and language development status. On the approaches in national language debates, Bamgbose (1991:31) further identifies three: status quo, radical and gradualist. Status quo approach involves what is obtainable in a country, an avoidance of the desirability of change. And while radical approach concerns a nationalist/revolutionary approach in terms of decreeing a language national language, the gradualist approach is evolutionary in nature, pertaining to adopting a national language policy that will make a chosen language national over a period of time.

Prior till now, five broad schools of thought have emerged in the quest of finding an appropriate national language for Nigeria. Based on the limitation of available insights at specific times, the present writer had also joined the debate by first upholding the status quo approach regarding the unifying roles of English and the need to sustain it and by subsequently clamouring for the Nigerian pidgin, otherwise called pidgin English (Adedimeji, 2003 and 2004). The background to this paper has served as vistas into discovering that the golden option had not emerged and that that option is undoubtedly Arabic. The existing five proposals are Hausa-Igbo-Yoruba or Majority language school, Afrike-Igala or Minority language school, Wazobia-Guosa or Artificial language school, the Swahili school as well as the Nigerian Pidgin school (cf. Shobomehin, 2002:15; Adedimeji, 2004:4).

#### Explaining the Flaws in National Language Schools in Nigeria

Oyelaran (1990:29) hits the bull's eye when he remarks: "no nation has had a breakthrough through the instrumentality of an alien language. Nigeria cannot be an exception". It is for this reason that the national language question deserves urgent attention rather than the ongoing politics of avoidance and the predominance of English as the instrument of exclusion in Nigeria. Despite the pride of place English



enjoys, some 70 percent of Nigerians still do not speak it (cf. Elugbe, 1990:10) while the United Nations' Report at the turn of the century maintains that adult-literacy rate in Nigeria is declining while communicative competence in English language itself has "declined considerably" (*Vanguard*, 2001:3). The main issue to be deduced from the above is that it is high time Nigeria adopted an indigenous language to launch the country on the pathway to total development.

Solarin (1965) is a forerunner in clamouring for a native tongue as a lingua franca (or national language) rather than English. He posits emphatically that the "Nigerian child will NEVER imbibe to the fullest every strand of education" as long as the medium of instruction is a foreign language". Though he maintains that the language Nigeria should adopt is not his focus as any Nigerian language is psychologically more acceptable than any foreign language, he implies his preference for Hausa. The merit of his thesis lies in underscoring the necessity of looking inwards, (what Adekunle (1995:59) refers to as centripetal attitude), a solid foundation for the subsequent proposals of what becomes the Hausa-Igbo-Yoruba school.

Also in this majority language school are Simpson (1978) and Osaji (1979) and Kara (1987) who argue ultimately for Hausa. Olagoke (1982) puts his weight behind the adoption of the three major Nigerian languages (Hausa-Igbo and Yoruba) based on certain points. The weaknesses, and hence, unsuitability cum unacceptability of this school have been dispassionately analyzed by Sofunke (1990). Besides, language attitude surveys have revealed that the three languages only draw positive attitudes from their individual speakers only (Babajide, 2001:12) and 74.3% of surveyed minority language speakers "dislike speakers of the three major Nigerian languages" (Igbonusi and Ohia, 2001:130). It is obvious that rather than have Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba as a national language, many Nigerians would rather prefer the status quo prominence of English.

The minority language school is made up of the proposition of 'Afrike', a language of Cross Rivers state spoken by 3,500 speakers by Joseph Usie and Biodun Sofunke's Igala, spoken in parts of Benue, former Bendel and Anambra states. While Afrike is an undeveloped language almost unknown outside its linguistic group, thus unacceptable, the proposal of Igala is deemed gratuitous. As such, the two proposals are not convincing. In fact, Sofunke's (1990) thesis is said to be fraught with many difficulties and it was only acknowledged and merely allowed to be "given publicity" for its uniqueness (Emenanjo, 1990:vii).

The artificial language school postulates a deliberate concoction of lexical items from many Nigerian languages as a solution to the national language logjam. The first is Wazobia, a blending the word "come" in the three major Nigeria languages, Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo respectively. The idea was short-lived as a result of lack of favourable response from language experts. Its life and death both took place on the television screen only (Babajide, 2001:10). The other proposal here is that of Guosa by one Alex Igbinewaka. Guosa was meant to incorporate lexical items of some



twenty-two Nigerian languages. The unacceptability of Guosa is predicated upon its artificiality and individuality. It has no cultural base and is spoken by nobody; as such, the formation of a new sentence by a new speaker will require looking for the proponent (Elugbe, 1990:11).

The Swahili school was championed by Wole Soyinka who suggested it as a national language during the World Black Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in 1977. As pointed out in Adedimeji (2004:9), the foreignness of Swahili to Nigeria is its major bane and opting for it is tantamount to running from one linguistic imperialism to the other. "It is therefore not surprising that apart from mere academic referencing nothing concrete has been heard about it since then". Despite its developed language status, Swahili is generally unqualified for the national language status in Nigeria (see table 3).

The Nigerian Pidgin school has attracted some favourable responses with arguments proffered for its official recognition and adoption as a national language (Agheyisi, 1984; Gani-Ikilama, 1990; Oladejo, 1991; Adegbija, 1994b; Egbokhare, 2001; Adedimeji, 2004). However, it suffers from negative attitudes among many Nigerians as demonstrated by participants of the International Convention of Association of Nigerian Authors in Lokoja in 2004. It is deemed as a low status language that lacks glorious past tradition. Arguments against Pidgin's candidature as a national language have been expounded by Adegbija (1994b:1-18).

The foregoing has shown that all the extant candidates for the national language are unacceptable. Though, Nigerian Pidgin and the majority languages of Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba are leading in terms of qualifications, the problems associated with them are quite massive given the volatile nature of the Nigerians and as such sentiments cannot be ignored. The implication of this is that as far as proposals for the national language are concerned, 'the beautiful ones are not yet born'.

#### A Case for the Adoption of Arabic

When the characteristics and the factors to be put into consideration in selecting a national language are objectively assessed, it is apparent that Arabic is the most qualified. On a broad appraisal, no other language has the triple honours of Arabic as an indigenous language to Nigeria and Africa as well as being a world language. Apart from its indigeneity, the language development status of Arabic is higher than any other Nigerian language. This is evidenced by Bamgbose's (1990:27) ranking of language types as thus:

	Languages	Nationalism	Nationism	Vertical integration	Acceptability	Population	Lang develop status
1	LWC (English)	+	-	-	±	-	+
2	Arabic	-	+	+	±	+	+
3	Indige-						



	nous language						
(a)	Major	-	+	+	±	+	+
(b)	Minority	-	+	-	-	-	-
(c)	Artificial	-	-	-	-	-	-
(d)	Pidgin	-	+	+	-	-	-

Table 1: Bamgbose's (1990) 'Rating of Language Types'

Another important point to be emphasized is that Arabic can indeed serve the purpose of nationism, along with English in Nigeria. This is because Arabic has the propensity of relatively uniting the mutually antagonistic Nigerian ethno-linguistic groups. For instance, authoritative sources trace the history of the Yoruba ancestors to Arabia specifically (Awe, 1964:1) while the Arabo-Islamic influence on the Hausa is well known. As such, the two major tribes have a historical meeting point in Arabic and as such can see themselves as one. Some sources also trace the origin of the Igbo to Middle East. The entrepreneurial spirit of the Igbo has been attributed to their Jewish historical origin; whereas Arabic is an official language, alongside Hebrew, in Israel.

As a matter of fact, Arabic has many utilities to Nigeria across different domains of life. Historically, as earlier highlighted, Arabic appertains to the glorious past of at least two major linguistic groups of Nigeria and it has exerted a great deal of influence on the lexicon of the two languages, just as it has on English. Arabic is also the language in which the history of Africa was first written. Many historical sources of West Africa are still extant in Arabic and as observed by AbdulRaheem (2004:2), "modern historians have begun to realize the role of Arabic in studying Africa's past".

At the cultural domain, that Arabic influences the cultures and languages of Hausa and Yoruba linguistic groups is undeniable. Hundreds of Hausa and Yoruba words are naturalized and borrowed from Arabic. Both languages had been written in Arabic scripts before the introduction of Latin scripts by the Western colonial educationists.

At the educational domain, Arabic is a viable language of instruction as well as a school subject. It functions as a school subject in Nigeria already. Arabic serves as the medium of intellectual advancement that ignited Western civilization. Vast academic contributions in Arabic have influenced the development of Medical Science, Pharmacology, Chemistry, Mathematics, Geography, Art and other areas of human endeavours that characterize Western civilization (Lari, 1977:52-85). Today, Arabic is the language of instruction in many Arab countries and it is richer in literature than all the literatures of other Nigerian languages combined.

At the political domain, Arabic is a world language, apart from being a Nigerian language. It is one of the official languages of the United Nations (UN), African Union (AU) and Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) all of which Nigeria is



a member. Arabic has the potential of advancing Nigerian diplomacy with a number of African and Asia countries.

At the religious domain, Arabic is the language of Islam being the language in which the Quran was revealed. As Nigerians are rated as "world's most religious people", (*Daily Independent*, 2004:A16), and majority of Nigerians are either Muslims or Christians, Arabic has the capacity of promoting religious tolerance and spiritual harmony among Nigerians. It is to Muslims what English is to Christians. Nigerian Muslims, it is believed in some quarters, have always been victimized since the killing of the Sultan of Sokoto, Attahiru Ahmadu in 1903 at Burmi and the subsequent deposition or exile of other Muslim leaders like the Emirs of Bida, Zaria, Kontangora and Burmi. The combination of Bible, Business and Bullet or Christianity, Commerce and Colonialism has been responsible for the imposition of English on the Nigerians, "a strategy adopted in turning of the tide against Arabic and Islam" (Abubakre, 2002:7; see also Fafunwa, 1974:74). Arabic can thus redress part of the alleged past and present injustices against Muslims in Nigeria, which often give a fillip to religious crises.

For religious crises are often products of bottled-up anger of real and perceived religious discrimination and imbalances in the polity. While past injustices against Muslims could be inferred from the previous paragraph, one of the recent injustices claimed is manifested National Political Reform Conference at Abuja in 2005. Muslims, through the Secretary General of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), Dr. Lateef Adegbite, have referred to the composition of the Dialogue as "blatant religious insolence" with its "chilling and unpalatable statistics" reported by Ehinrim et al. (2005:A2):

... Adegbite insisted, including the facts that out of 46 presidential nominees as members, 29 are Christians while 17 are Muslims. Of the 20 nominees from the South, only one is a Muslim while 19 are Christians. Of the grand total of 382 nominees, 217 are Christians against 165 Muslims".

He accused Obasanjo of "awarding Christians close to two-thirds majority" of the Dialogue delegates and noted that "the two principal officers of the conference, the chairman and secretary, are Christians".

Never in the history of Nigeria have "Muslims been treated so inequitably" he stressed and appealed to Obasanjo "to halt the creeping marginalization of Nigerian Muslims".

Therefore, at this religious domain, Arabic as a national language can serve as a balm that will cool the frayed nerves of the Muslims who feel the agonizing pains of the socio-political discrimination against them and are therefore disenchanted with the government and the polity.

1	Engl
2	Fren
3	Arab
4	Haus
	Igbo-



At the level of promoting nationalism, Arabic satisfies the reasons for proposing minority languages as national languages. The proponents of artificial language have anchored their reasons on the main premise of political domination by the major linguistic groups (that already have numerical advantages). Jibril (1990:115) in a list of twenty four minority languages "with 100,000 or more speakers in 1986" ranks "shuwa Arab" as number 13, with 311,000 speakers. It should be noted, however, that the tribe is "shuwa Arab", while the language is Arabic or what Abubakre (1988) refers to as "Nigerian Arabic" just as one would differentiate other native varieties of English like American English, Australian English, South-African English, etc. from British English. The native Arabic speakers in Nigeria rank among the largest minority language groups in the country. And with the existing structures of thousands of Arabic Islamic schools in Nigeria and the positive gestures from the government, teaching Arabic to Nigerians will never be as expensive as teaching any other minority language in terms of material development, language status and personnel.

Thus, the virtues of Arabic transcend the narrow confines of being the language of Islam as being represented by some linguistics. Like English, it has many other utilities rather than being vehicle of religion. It is note-worthy at this juncture that the first Yoruba Professor of Arabic is a Christian. To an informed linguist like him (Professor Isaac Ogunbiyi of Lagos State University, Ojoo), there is a difference between language and religion and as thus, his knowledge of Arabic, like other Arab Christians, does not have anything to do with his religious belief. It is therefore erroneous and uncalled for to assume that adopting Arabic as the Nigerian national language is akin to adopting Islam as a state religion. The fears of those who may want to oppose Arabic as a result of its religious domain are therefore unfounded. More than any other Nigerian language, Arabic has the capacity of fostering religious harmony. Just like Muslims who speak English, Arabic-speaking Christians are more tolerant than those who do not speak it. With such a policy that makes Muslims speak English (the language of the Bible today) and makes the Christians speak Arabic (the language of the Quran), it is sure that religious crises, violence and discrimination that often wreck cataclysmic consequences on the polity will be drastically reduced if not totally avoided.

Therefore, Bamgbose's (1991:27) "rating of language types" earlier presented and Adedimeji's (2004a:10) "how languages stand in Nigeria" can be modified thus to incorporate the true status of languages in Nigeria.

		Nationa- lism	Nationism	Vertical integration	Acceptability	Population	Lang develop. status
1	English	+	-	-	±	-	+
2	French	±	-	-	±	-	+
3	Arabic	+	+	+	±	+	+
4	Hausa- Igbo-	-	+	-	±	+	+



	Yoruba						
5	Minority language	-	+	-	-	-	-
6	Artificial language	-	-	-	-	-	-
7	Nigerian Pidgin	+	+	+	±	+	-
8	Swahili	+	-	-	±	-	+

Table 2: The Status of Languages in Nigeria

From the table above based on the methodology of Bamgbose (1991), it can be seen that French is added. This is because the revised Policy on Education (1998:9) has curiously ranked French as the second official language in Nigeria and made it compulsory in schools. If not for the politics of language, Arabic should have reasonably clinched the new status of French because in all ramifications, French ranks below Arabic and to most Nigerians. English and French are thus the Nigerian official languages or Languages of Wider Communication (LWC). But considering the emergence of the national language from all languages in use or suggested as national language, Arabic is the most qualified.

As presented in Adedimeji (2004a:11), the most qualified language for the national language status can be viewed mathematically by construing positive sign (+) as 5 points, negative sign (-) as 0 point and positive-negative sign (±) as 2.5 points, that is, the mid-way between (+) and (-). The result shows that English has 12.5 points, French; 10 points; Arabic, 27.5 points; Hausa-Igbo-Yoruba, 17.5 points; minority language, 5 points; artificial language, 0 point; Nigerian Pidgin (NP), 22.5 points and Swahili, 12.5 points. The percentage scores are as follows:

Languages	Qualification Points	Percentage
English	12.5	11.63
French	10	9.30
Arabic	27.5	25.58
Hausa-Igbo-Yoruba	17.5	16.28
Minority language	5	4.65
Artificial language	0	0
Nigerian pidgin	22.5	20.93
Swahili	12.5	11.63
Total	107.5	100

Table 3: Qualification Results for the National Language

The implication of the results is that given the average of 15 out of 30 points on which the languages are evaluated, just three languages are qualified. These are



Arabic, Nigerian Pidgin and Hausa-Igbo-Yoruba consecutively. The others are not qualified as they fall below average. It goes without saying that when the factors for selecting a national language are strictly considered and objectively examined, Arabic comes first and is only followed by Nigerian Pidgin after which the majority languages, which are also well qualified, come.

Another implication of the results is that the constitutional recognition of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba is in order, despite the opposition mounted against them. That the then General Olusegun Obasanjo did not allow sentiments to over-ride the national interest is deemed welcome and courageous. History has a way of repeating itself. That the language question now comes to the front-burner with the language game at Addis Ababa during the tenure of the same (but now President) Olusegun Obasanjo is indicative of the posterity placed in his hands. His government is thus enjoined to discountenance the natural opposition that some forces may mount against the adoption of Arabic as a national language, just as they did against the adoption of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba in 1978.

It is gratifying to note that the government has heeded the call made by Adedimeji (2004b:73) for "the convocation of a national conference" wherein lies the key to resolving the multifarious ethnic or multilingual-instigated problems of Nigeria. It is therefore hoped that in the same vein, the present proposal will be considered and ratified. President Obasanjo addressed the language question once and he should address it once again. The first step in this regard is the review of the National Policy on Education and the classification of Arabic as a core subject just like French. The language should also be recognized as an alternative medium of instruction. While retaining the official status of English and French, Arabic should be pronounced and recognized as the Nigerian national language.

### Conclusion

Language is the hub around which all human activities social, political, economic, educational etc revolve. Without language, there is evidently no society, no polity, no nation, no democracy and ultimately no development. As no man can survive fully without language, as such, no nation can fully progress and develop without a common linguistic basis. National languages have thus been selected by various nations of the world with a view to accelerating their progression along the competitive line of development. There is no developed nation in the world without a national language(s) and the perennial 'developing' status of Nigeria is partly due to dearth of a national language through which all aspects of national development can be galvanized. It is in this light that this paper addresses the national language in Nigeria and examines the politics ensnaring its selection from the 394 languages of Nigeria (Elugbe, 1990:11).

The paper proposes Arabic as the Nigerian national language as a result of its unrivalled qualities that qualify it for the role. Arabic serves both internal and external purposes for Nigeria. Historically, educationally, culturally, politically,



religiously and generally, Arabic is first among equals. And by correcting the dominant but erroneous impression that Arabic is a foreign language whose utilities are restricted to being the language of Islam, it is argued that the golden language is Arabic while other issues against it are purely political. It is recommended that the existing National Policy on Education be reviewed especially now by the government (perhaps through the participants in the National Political Reform Conference) and that it should be subsequently made a compulsory school subject as well as the national language of Nigeria.

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