

The Unifying Role of English in a Multilingual Nation: The Case of Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper addresses the vexed issue of language question in Nigeria by exploring the unifying significance of the English language. It foregrounds that though the continuous use of English as the nation's lingua franca is tantamount to perpetuating colonialism/imperialism, yet there is no alternative indigenous language that can assume the role of English. It is maintained that, given the prevalent and ever-increasing mutual suspicion of, and linguistic rivalry among, the various Nigerian ethno-linguistic groups, English will continue to be vibrant. The paper submits that English appears to have been surreptitiously attached to the destiny of Nigeria, and any attempt to alter the status quo, as it is, in favour of one of the Nigerian languages, will lead to a chain of socio-political crises that will assuredly threaten the corporate existence of Nigeria. It is ultimately suggested that the convocation of a national conference, which is being clamoured for by some segments of the Nigerian society, may proffer solutions to the language question, among other problems that ensnare the country.

Introduction

If you insist, the union will be dissolved. It would mean that you have kindled a fire which all the waters of the ocean cannot put out, which seas of blood can only extinguish.

— Thomas W. Cob

One of the dominant and pervasive problems in Nigeria, and in Africa at large, is the language question. Language, being a potent vehicle of transmitting cultures, values, norms and beliefs from generation to generation, remains a central factor in determining the status or nature of any nation. This informs the submission of Isayev (1977:1992) 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." The dominant inference from Isayev's observation is that for national integration, cohesion and development, there must be a language acceptable to all in running a nation's affairs.

In Nigeria, where like many other African nations, multilingualism is a rule, rather than an exemption, the problem of 'forging ahead' is of crucial import. Among the competing languages that scramble for national recognition or official status, whether indigenous or foreign, one must emerge as the official language (the language of administration and education at some levels), the language of relevance, from the competitors for the purpose of uniting the nation. Fortunately or unfortunately, English has emerged as that privileged language without which the unity of Nigeria as a nation is mostly improbable, if not outrightly impossible.

This article attempts to highlight how the English language, of other functions it performs in Nigeria, unites the country. This unifying role and its allied issues are discussed with a view to showing that the imposition or adoption of any language

apart from English as the nation's official language will lead to the scenario captured by Thomas W. Cob above; and why from now till a relatively long time to come, if not absolutely forever, the continuous existence of Nigeria will be analogous to the nineteenth-century Wales, the slogan of which was: "if you want to get ahead, get an English head" (Williams, 1986 cited in Bamigbose, 1991:20).

The English Language in the Multilingual Nigerian Context

Multilingualism is a sociolinguistic phenomenon that arises as a result of language contact. It is a situation in which two (i.e. bilingualism, specifically) or more languages operate within the same context. Factors such as political annexation, marital relation, economic transaction, cultural association, educational acquisition and religious affiliation bring about multilingualism. All these factors underpin the socio-political landscape of Nigeria today even though the combination of political annexation and economic transaction or exploitation originally brought the people referred to as Nigerians today in contact with the English people. The advent of the English colonialists in the 18th century brought about 'linguistic imperialism' a situation by which, according to Asne (1979) as cited in Fanilola (1988:89):

The minds and lives of the speakers of a language are dominated by another language to the point where they believe that they can and should use only the foreign language when it comes to transactions dealing with the advanced aspects of life such as education, philosophy, literature, government, the administration of justice.

Through overt and covert means such as trade and commerce, educational policies and ordinances, missionary activities, schools, literature, constitutions, job opportunities and political might, English was successfully entrenched in Nigeria. With the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914 came the need, in a more crucial dimension, to have a common tongue for the country. With the promotion of English in every stratum of national life, including nationalist activities, arose the subjugation of about 450 Nigerian languages, the major ones of which include Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Fulani, Kanuri, Ibibio, Tiv, Ijo, Edo, Urhobo, Nupe, Idoma, just to mention a few.

When Nigeria attained her political independence, 'linguistic imperialism' had to be sustained in the interest of the nation. This is because there was no indigenous language that could perform the function of English because of the mutual suspicion of, and ethnic consciousness among, virtually all Nigerians. Multilingualism which should be viewed as an asset, an embodiment of the cultural diversity and linguistic enrichment of the country, became a liability and the popular attitude to it is that associated with 'the curse of Babel'.

At the risk of being alleged to be aiding and abetting "linguistic imperialism" in some quarters, the incontrovertible truth about the state of the nation today, as it was yesterday, is that no indigenous language is acceptable to all Nigerians. The view presented by Nida and Wonderly (1971:65) is prevalent and correct till today. They contend that:

In Nigeria, there is simply no politically neutral language. In fact, the division into three major regions reflects the three language poles: Hausa, Yoruba, 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.

The observation of Nida and Wonderly receive further justification in the submission of the foremost nationalist and prominent Nigerian, Chief Anthony Enahoro recently. Enahoro (2002:18-19) remonstrates the *status quo* constitutional recognition of even Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. He contends that such official recognition is tantamount to brazen-faced discrimination and *ipso facto* is unacceptable. The illocutionary force of Enahoro's views clearly reveals his attitudinal disposition to the three major Nigerian languages. It further shows that whether we like it or not, call it 'linguistic imperialism', 'colonial mentality', 'inferiority complex' or 'pessimistic prognosis', the fact remains that the English language will continue to triumph, and the language policy will continue to be a paper affair. To quote Enahoro at length is not superfluous or impertinent:

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.

One might even go further to say that no collection of linguistic group have the linguistic right to impose their separate languages on the other linguistic groups in the country. 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. Government should not confer on some Nigerian languages the potentiality of instrument of domination over other Nigerian groups. Over one billion people speak Chinese and nearly one billion people speak Hindi, yet it has never been suggested that these two mass languages should therefore be imposed on the rest of the world or that UNESCO should promote them as world languages in preference to English or Arabic.

There is no doubt that Enahoro's thesis is a good text for semantic, pragmatic and stylo-rhetorical analysis. However, it is a vindication of the sensitivity of language question in Nigeria and why the efforts of the advocates of our indigenous languages for official language will continue to be in vain. If not, one would wonder how all the Nigerian languages will be valid to be the national/official languages at the same time. Such is an impossibility. This situation is relatively contiguous with, or akin to, that of India. Constitutionally, English was supposed to be replaced by Hindi fifteen years after independence. But because of the vehement opposition by non-Hindi-speaking groups, the requirement was therefore suspended through the Language Legislation Act of 1967 (Bamgbose, 1991:22). At the end of the day, English is the victor and the indigenous languages are the vanquished.

Empirically, the study of Igboanusi and Ohia (2001:125-142) involving one thousand respondents (who include doctors, lawyers, teachers, politicians, civil servants and students) in four minority languages zones in the country shows that 743 or 74.3% of respondents dislike speakers of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba and 49.6% of them feel that the speakers of the three major Nigerian languages do not think well of the minority language groups (Igboanusi and Ohia, 2001:130). Ultimately, the researchers report that most of the respondents (65.7%) showed preference for English as Nigeria's *lingua franca*. 19.3% of the respondents desired that their local languages become Nigeria's future *lingua franca*, while 5.3%, 3.6% and 6.1% of them want either Yoruba, Igbo or Hausa, in the respective order, to emerge as Nigeria's future *lingua franca* (Igboanusi and Ohia, 2001:134).

It is evident from the above that multilingualism in Nigeria is not accorded its positive value. In the words of Schwarz cited in Bamgbose (1991:39), differences between indigenous languages keep the people apart, perpetuate ethnic hostilities, weaken national loyalties and increase the danger of separatist sentiment. In essence, the nation today faces a serious test, a challenge of continuity and survival (Oladesu, 2002:14).

The Unifying Roles of English in Nigeria

A lot of ink has been spilled already on the roles or functions of English in Nigeria, the pioneer being Bamgbose (1971):

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...

It is not our intention to repeat what has been said over and over here but to show how this most important language of the world (being the first language of the United Nations and arguably the only language spoken in all nations of the world) helps in promoting, nurturing and uniting the Nigerian nation.

English is the language of integration in Nigeria as our previous discussion shows. Amidst the compounding complexities of Nigeria especially in relation to the language question, the only language that indexes the spirit of togetherness is English. More often than not, activities conducted in indigenous languages are reprobated as being ethnic or tribal, except in cultural celebrations or entertainment displays. This explains why even during the first republic and even the colonial era, when English had not attained its present level of ascendancy in national and international affairs, political parties were formed in English. Though, the parties might have regional bases, the fact that they were named in English entailed their collective import. The Northern Peoples Congress (NPC), the Action Group (AG), the NCNC (National Council of Nigerian Citizens, after the excision of Southern Cameroon), National Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) etc were formed to integrate all Nigerians and give them a sense of belonging. This trend has necessarily survived till today with all the national political parties formed and sloganeered in English.

This integrative role is not limited to politics or political parties alone but virtually all strata of Nigerian life. In sports, the function of English as its language gives room for integration as it remains the only area where the syndrome of

ethnicity/tribalism has not permeated. Most Nigerians do not care whether the national team is made up of members of the same family, not to talk of an ethnic group, as long as they can deliver the goods: goals, goals. The use of English facilitates the absence of ethnic sentiments in this regard.

English is also acceptable to all – even to those who clamour against its irresistible dominance. It is the language that is not fraught with suspicions in any formal or literate context. During the military regime of General Abacha for instance, there was an allegation or insinuation that the apex ruling council meetings were sometimes conducted in Hausa which the second in command, General Diya did not speak, at a time that the relationship between them became frosty. It is the only language that does not generate suspicions of having a skeleton in one's cupboard or a 'hidden agenda' in inter-ethnic relationships or transactions.

English also serves as the language of nationalism, concerned with political integration and efficiency (Bamgbose, 1991:20). It is the language that brings all the supposed 'nations' of Nigeria to function as one. Mention is often made of each ethnic group being a nation on its own with the Hausa nation, the Ibo nation, the Yoruba nation, the Edo nation, Jukunland, Tivland, Urhoboland, Ogoniland etc. as examples. But, the cohesion of all under the subsuming Nigerian nation is possible through English. In other words, without English, the ubiquitous violent ethnic groups like Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) Egbesu Boys, the Arewa Peoples Congress (APC) Ijaw Youth Solidarity (IYS), Bakassi Boys, and other militant groups would have found more justification for desiring to secede from the Nigerian federation.

Ironically, it is also the language of nationalism. This is because the love for the country as a whole has to be manifested through the language intelligible to all and sundry, lest the 'ethnic agenda' be implicated. This reason accounts for why nationalists like Herbert Macaulay, Obafemi Awolowo, Ahmadu Bello, Nnamdi Azikiwe had to use English language as a weapon of nationalist struggle. A nationalist is a nationalist based on expressing his patriotic views in English. If English is not used to express the same ideas for which he is known as a nationalist, he becomes an ethnic jingoist or a tribal apologist. It is the language of authenticity in Nigeria today.

As a Language of Wider Communication (LWC), English is used for phatic communion, ceremonial purpose, instrument of keeping records, information dissemination, self-expression and embodiment of thought among the various linguistic groups of Nigeria. The common linguistic basis that constitutes a requisite for the existence of any nation is provided by English. So with English as the common tongue to all the ethnic groups, the collective sentiment of belonging together despite the individual or ethnic differences is forged.

Related to the roles discussed is the fact that Nigerianism or collective identity is stamped on national institutions through the medium of English. The army, the navy, the air force and the police that all safeguard the territorial integrity of, and peaceful existence in, Nigeria are controlled with English (unadulterated or adulterated – pidgin). The National Youth Service Corps (YNSC) is aimed at bringing together Nigerian youths with a view to reinforcing the sentiment of oneness. The constitution of Nigeria is written in English to create a level ground for all Nigerians to play, though the metalanguage for the teaching of each of the three language and their legislative terms was being developed (at a time in the past) in the three major languages.

Writing in English by Nigerian literary artists has also created a distinctive Nigerian literature marked by its own characteristics imbued with features of intercultural communication and cooperation. English is also the language of international relations and diplomacy – the language that mirrors Nigeria to the world. All these have the effects of reducing what Adegbiya (1994:150) refers to as “deep-rooted mutual suspicions that result in prejudice, stereotypes and subtle linguistic hostility among various linguistic groups.” And in fact, there are obvious national symbols such as the national flag, the national anthem, the national day/independence day, the national associations as well as several national monuments all of which are designed in English and all of which ‘assert’ that English is the foundation of the magnificent structure called Nigeria. If English is removed, it is agreeable, the whole nation automatically crumbles.

English Versus Indigenous Languages: Towards A United Nigeria

There have been arguments and counter-arguments for and against the issue of English language as the official language/language of education in Nigeria (cf. Fanilola, 1988 and Babatunde, 2001). Rather than solving the issue, it is becoming more problematized at the level of finding an attractive candidate to replace it by scholars as each suggestion is fraught with controversies. When Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba are being stoutly resisted since 1961 when parliament debated national language question, till date (as evident in Enahoro, 2002), the minority languages have no candidature as population is a key factor in language planning. The suggestion of pidgin or the hybrid ‘Wazobia’ and such unrealistic alternatives is also riddled with more complex problems.

In a situation like this, it is obvious that English becomes increasingly important. The volatile Nigerian socio-political domain requires English now, more than ever before, to avoid disintegration and threat to its corporate existence. Though, one is uncomfortable with the negative sides of English as it ‘masterminds’ the relegation of the Nigerian languages to the extent that we do not have a real language policy, instantiates the systematic loss of Nigerian cultural identity among the younger generation and ensures the consolidation of colonial legacy, yet there is no any other language that can keep Nigeria one apart from English. The ‘war against English’ in some quarters is thus a lost battle. English has already been nativised and the challenge now is the standardization of Nigerian English – simply the variety of English that is marked by local aura at all levels of linguistic analysis: phonology, morphology, syntax, lexico-semantics and pragmatics. Efforts should be geared towards developing and promoting Nigerian languages as national heritage, it is agreed, but English should not be de-emphasized at all for Nigerians to be able to function well, acceptably and intelligibly, in the fast constricting modern world and in fact, to survive as a nation. The utilities of English need not be undermined for the purpose of promoting Nigerian languages.

Although a united Nigeria rests on English, yet her survival as a nation is beyond English. Nigeria is just a ‘nation on paper’ as Professor Wole Soyinka is wont to say because of her inherent contradictions – Ours is:

A nation where its public sector is grossly inept, inefficient, dogmatic, arrogant, unfecundious, unpatriotic, erratic, incorrigible, corrupt, abusive, lackadaisical, abrasive and irredeemably over bureaucratic.

A nation where the law enforcement system is actively obsolete, illiterate, myopic, robotic, bigotic, anachronistic, corrupt, suspicious, unprogressive, schizophrenic, prodigacious, psychologically inferior, unimaginative, intellectually porous, academically jealous and pessimistic.

A nation where her leadership has mere glorification of the old order of carnivorous feudalism, god-fatherism, mafiaism, cabal tribalism, traditional rulership of royal blood hegemony and patron of serfdom.¹

For Nigeria to survive as a real nation, the problems identified have to be properly addressed. The demand for constitutional reforms has to be met to create justice and equity in the distribution and administration of resources. The call for a national conference to determine the basis of togetherness should be heeded so that the tension that pervades Nigeria and the problems of political bickerings, economic sabotage, social unrest, educational backwardness, development deficit, corruption and graft, misgovernance, indiscipline, unemployment, poverty, injustice and other social tragedies that ensnare Nigeria and threaten her unity – far beyond English but which will be expectedly addressed in English – will be tackled.

Conclusion

Like all multilingual nations, Nigeria is faced with the language question. An artificial contraption of heterogeneous ethnic communities and linguistic groups forcefully determined by the colonial interlopers, for selfish political and economic reasons, Nigeria has to survive despite the "mistakes" of her assemblage on a common linguistic ground. Based on the well known Sapir-Whorf hypothesis [i.e. the principles of linguistic determinism (language determines the way we think) and linguistic relativity (the distinctions encoded in one language are not found in any other language)], one would have expected that one of our indigenous languages assumes the official status or the language of education because "the child learns better in his mother tongue and that his mother tongue is as natural to him as his mother's milk" (Fafunwa, 1983:395) and "more developed communities use their own languages in education and technical training (Asne, cited in Fanilola, 1988:84). But the reverse is the case in Nigeria, like many other African nations, as the colonial language of English still remains dominant as the language of virtually all aspects of national life: politics, administration, business, sports, diplomacy, communication, media, education, creativity, literacy, constitution, law, just to mention a few.

We have hereby examined how English functions as the language of unity in Nigeria and forms the basis of the nation's linguistic existence. It is contended that with controversies surrounding the adoption of any of the Nigerian languages and the grave implications such adoption engenders, English language saves the day as the nation's *lingua franca*. It integrates all Nigeria as a cohesive entity, it is acceptable to all (to some grudgingly), and it serves the purpose of nationism and nationalism at the same time as it lessens the feelings of perceived intra-national linguistic domination by majority groups.

For the unity of Nigeria to be sustained, it is ultimately suggested that the English language must continue to play its roles. Nevertheless, it is pointed out, the survival of the Nigeria nation depends on many other factors beyond the scope of this

treatise and "the mistakes of the founding fathers" have to be corrected. Many a Nigerian is discontented with the polity as it is and all the ethnic groups have grudges against the pseudo – federalism of Nigeria. It is suggested that the key to resolving the multifarious ethnic or multilingual-instigated problems is in the convocation of a national conference where differences will be ironed out and the basis for the existence, continuity and political relationship of Nigeria will be evolved (Oladesu, 2002:15). The earlier this call is heeded, and the language question more dispassionately addressed, the better for the country.

NOTE

¹ This quotation is credited to Professor Wole Soyinka by "News Major," (1997 edition) a student publication of the University of Ibadan.

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