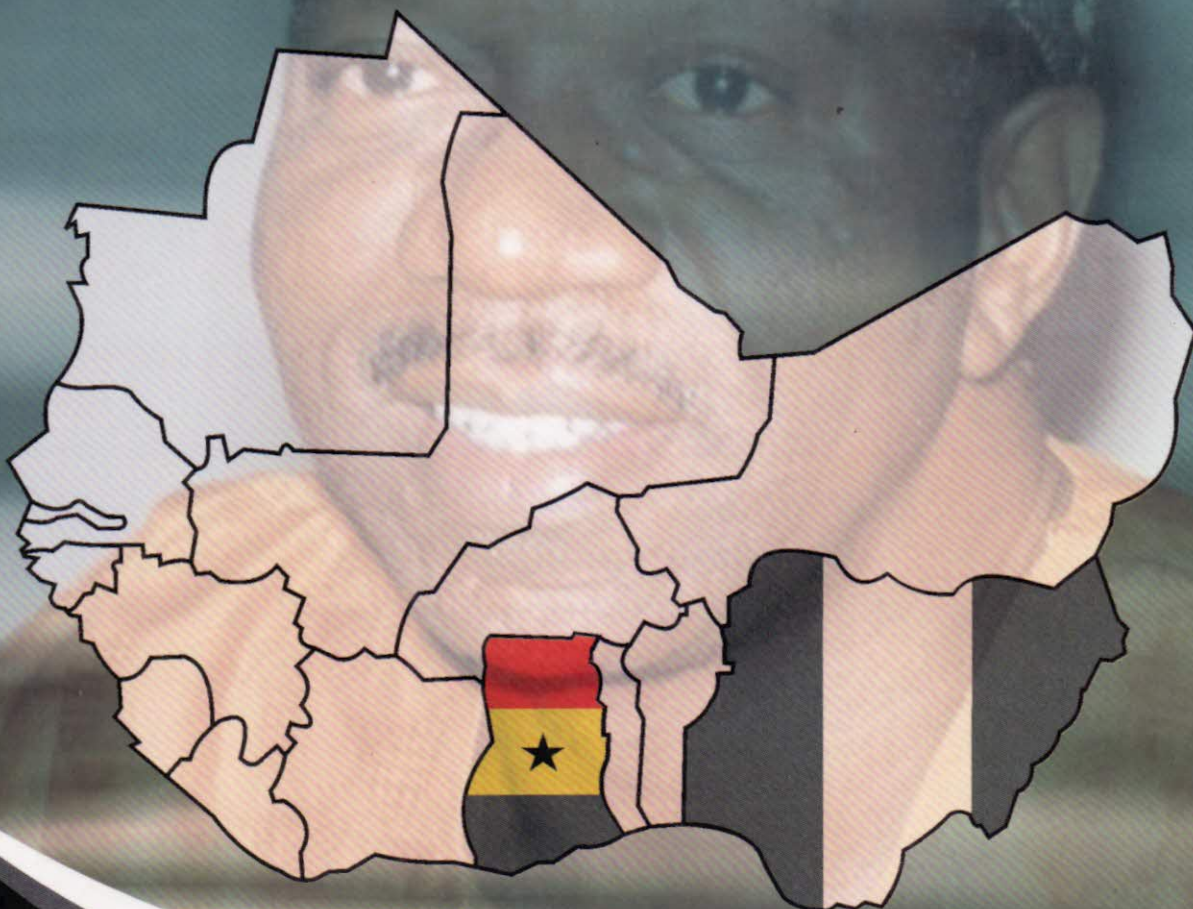


APPLIED SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF LANGUAGE USE AND TEACHING IN WEST AFRICA

FESTSCHRIFT IN HONOUR OF
PROFESSOR TUNDE AJIBOYE



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BARRIERS TO CHILD LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE: THE CASE OF YORUBÁ

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Introduction

Language has been described as the means by which a person learns to organize experiences and thought. According to Adebayo (1995:230), the child learns to order and react to habits about environment through language. The totality of these habits is what anthropologists refer to as culture, language being the main link between all other components of the same culture.

'Wa Thiong'o (1994:13) also sees language as having a dual character: a means of communication and a carrier of culture. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. Language is thus inseparable from a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history and a specific relationship.

However, since the colonialist imposition of foreign languages on Africa, African languages and culture have been suppressed. Thus, the African child is exposed predominantly to a culture that is a product of a world external to himself. This alienation from his immediate environment becomes clearer when the colonial language assumes the role of a carrier of culture. Isola (1995:312) observes that the socialization of a child into culture or society involves the use of his indigenous language, which he describes as the life blood of any culture. He concludes that the use of a foreign language by a child can only be a poor second best.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the recognition given the English language at the expense of the Nigerian indigenous languages is the bane of poor performance of a Yoruba child in his mother tongue. The result, according to Isola (1995:312), is that the competence of the child in Yoruba language would be dangerously affected. The realization of this problem and the desire to proffer some solutions form the basis for this paper.

Theoretical framework

The theory adopted for this study is the post-colonial theory. The theory is best used to designate the totality of practices, in all their rich diversity, which characterize the societies of the post-colonial world from the moment of colonization to the present day, since colonialism does not cease with the mere fact of political independence. It continues in a neo-colonial mode to be active in many societies (Ashcroft et al, 1995: xv).

Post-colonial theory involves discussion about experience of various kinds: migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, differences, race, gender, and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe in such fields as history, philosophy and linguistics, and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being.

The term 'post-colonial' is used to represent the continuing process of imperial suppressions and exchanges throughout this diverse range of societies in their institutions and their discursive practices (Ashcroft et al; 1995: 1-2). Therefore, the post-colonial theory is most appropriate for this discourse because it is used to condemn the imposition of foreign language on the colonized country like Nigeria.

Barriers to child language performance in Yoruba

The fundamental cause of a poor performance of a Yoruba child in his mother tongue could be attributed to the issue of colonialism. The contention started when the British came to colonise Nigeria, a country with a multiplicity of peoples, cultures and languages. It was not long when their missions began to manifest. They succeeded in controlling the economy, politics and cultures of their host nation. Since the period of colonization, African countries, as colonies and even today as neo-colonies, came to be defined and to define themselves in terms of the languages of Europe.

After independence, Nigeria adopted her former colonial masters' language (English) as the language for administration and educational purposes. Even at the formal pre-primary educational level, English is the medium of communication to the children who are just coming from complete mother tongue homes and neighbourhoods. In connection with this, a conspicuously written phrase such as "No vernacular speaking in this school" is usually displayed in such schools. Thus, a child caught speaking his mother tongue would be given corporal punishment. On the contrary, when the child returns home, his parents would continue with the use of the mother tongue. This throws the child into a great confusion; the result of which turns a child to an alien in his own native society.

An experience rightly comes to mind when I visited a family in Abeokuta, Ogun State in Nigeria. A mother was addressing her daughter of about four years old in Yoruba language, and the daughter responded thus: "Mummy, stop speaking onbá, my teacher said that we should not speak onbá". ('Onbá' in the child's parlance means 'Yorùbá').

This experience speaks a volume on the damage caused the Nigerian indigenous languages by the imposition of English language. The attitude to English is the exact opposite. Any achievement in spoken or written English is highly rewarded with prizes, prestige and applause. Therefore, the language of a child's upbringing in school becomes divorced from his spoken language at home.

Another barrier to poor performance of a Yoruba child in his mother tongue is the linguistic habit displayed by parents. This is equally a fall-out of colonization. It is ironic that most Yoruba parents prefer their children using English to using their mother tongue. This has turned abnormality into normality. The colonial masters started with a deliberate dissociation of the language of conceptualization, of thinking, of formal education and of mental development, from the language of daily interaction in the home and in the community ('wa Thiong'o, 1994:28). Therefore, since the English language has been perceived as the language of modernity, the parents derive joy in hearing their children speaking it fluently, even if they (the children) cannot pronounce a word correctly in Yoruba language.

Furthermore, the government's attitudinal posture to the Nigerian Indigenous languages is regrettable. Though the Language Policy stipulates that at the pre-primary level "the medium of instruction will be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community..." (Section 2:11), yet, at the pre-primary level of Education today, the medium of instruction is principally the English language. Development as a collaborative venture can best be achieved in the context of indigenous culture and language; hence the danger in de-emphasizing the mother tongue. In fact, Adeniran (1995:193) cautions that the continued entrenchment of English at this initial level of the educational system can only retard learning. Moreso, as the majority of the children now pouring into the schools come from complete mother tongue homes and neighbourhoods, the importance of indigenous languages cannot be under-estimated.

That the Yorùbá child should speak well

Various scholars have suggested some solutions to the poor performance of a child in his own mother tongue. Notable among them are Fafunwa (1982), Bamgbose (1984), Adeniran (1995), 'wa Thiong'o (1994) and a host of others.

For instance, Adeniran (1995:189) declares unequivocally that development efforts and scholarship in Africa have hardly even been original; instead they have mostly been the initiative of the

West. And they could not have been original because they have been and are still being conducted in the medium of the West. He quickly submits that as most protagonists of education in the indigenous languages have remarked (citing Kashoki, 1978 as an example), the secret of Japan's development achievements is the medium of the Japanese children's education, i.e. the Japanese language.

In other words, if the Nigerian government could take a bold step like that of Japan towards the use of mother tongue, there would be an appreciable development. The experiment in Mother Tongue Medium (MTM) in Yoruba language carried out at the then University of Ife, tagged "The six-year primary project in Nigeria" confirms this. That experiment, according to Adeniran (1995:195), empirically demonstrated the great advantages of full MTM in primary education for scholastic attainment, and even in the successful mastery of English as a second language. Similarly, Fafunwa (1982) posits that a child learns best in his mother tongue and that the mother tongue is as natural to him as mother's milk. He concludes that:

If the Nigerian child is to be encouraged from the start to develop curiosity, initiative, industry, manipulative ability, spontaneous flexibility, manual dexterity, mechanical comprehension and the co-ordination of hand and eye, he should acquire these skills and attitudes through his mother-tongue (p.295).

Interestingly, the Nigerian government is concerned with the promotion of culture and tourism. This is a commendable effort, but its goal could only be achieved if the language, which is the life blood of any culture, is developed. Since the language is a carrier of culture, it carries the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world.

Also, a child's performance in his mother tongue could be enhanced through its oral literature. Oral literature is of crucial importance in the early intellectual development of the child. According to Isola (1995: 312), the intellectual development of the child begins in the early months of life when it starts responding to the first contacts with adults through sound and movement packaged in accentuated rhythm. There are children's poems in Yoruba which children chant and sing as soon as they can speak. These poems stimulate the intellect by forcing the children to observe similarities or connections hitherto unnoticed in the poems.

Isola (1995: 316-317) opines that the use of children's poems and songs in Yorùbá is a positive orientation. Some children's poems are designed to teach language competence. Example of such is found in tongue twisters such as:

Adie funfun má funfun nífunfun-kúfunfun mó

(white hen, stop being white in such an objectionably white fashion).

Similar to tongue twisters are certain mnemonics which serve as aid-memoire for counting. They are so composed to help children remember counting from one to ten. Couched in poetic language, they are easier for the child to remember than dry numbers. Examples are:

Ení bí ení [1]

Èjì bí èjì [2]

Èta n tagbá [3]

Èrin wòròkò [4]

Àrún n gbódó [5]

Èfà ti èlè [6]

Bóró n bóro [7]

Aro ni bàtá [8]

Mo jálákèsán [9]

Gbangba lèwá [10] (Isola 1995: 317)

These poems, according to Isola, provide solid foundations in language acquisition, and the fruits are reaped throughout life. Some of these poems actually introduce the child to the first rudiments of language analysis.

Of equal importance is the use of proverbs. Proverbs carry along with them linguistic beauty and cultural wealth and information. Proverbs are normally the special preserve of elders, but because they are used so often in the presence of children, proverbs often set them thinking. Besides,

proverbs are often sources of amazing summaries of empirical observation, the veracity of which the inquisitive child may want to investigate.

Another kind of Yoruba oral poetry that could assist child language performance is folktales. Folktales in general contain allegorical fantasy and tend to awaken children's creative ability. Children develop intellectually and socially as they take their turns at the nightly storytelling sessions.

Unfortunately, the average Yoruba child of today cannot tell good Yoruba folktales. The result is that the competence of children in the Yoruba language has been badly affected, and when children lack competence in the language of a culture, they cannot have access to the wealth of information available in that culture.

We reason along with Isola (1995:320) who suggests that the situation could be corrected with the aid of modern technology. A massive programme for the collection and preservation of all children's oral literature can be launched. The materials so collected can be creatively used in special programmes on radio and television. In addition, the school curriculum, at least, at pre-primary school level, should be strengthened to accommodate children's oral literature. It is also suggested that a collection of Odunjo's children's poems, *Àkójopò Ewì Aládùn* be introduced at this level as well.

There is a need for a general re-orientation on the psyche of the parents and the society at large. Feelings for the indigenous languages should be encouraged. Parents and guardians should encourage their children and wards to speak their mother tongues at home. They should not allow their children to perceive their mother tongues as barbaric.

Conclusion

So far, this paper has examined the barriers to child language performance in Africa in general and among the Yoruba in particular. A post-colonialist theory has been adopted for this study. It has been established that the major barrier to child language performance in Africa is the fall-out from colonization. Aside from this, parents, the society and the government are yet to come out of the mentality of perceiving an imposed colonial language, as the language of modernity while their indigenous languages are barbaric.

Buttressing our submission with the views of earlier scholars on this discourse, we are of the opinion that the whole scenario could be redeemed, only if the Nigerian government sincerely and vigorously adheres to its avowed Language Policy on Education which stipulates that "at the pre-primary level, the medium of instruction will be principally the mother-tongue (sic) or the language of the immediate community...".

Besides, section 3 paragraph 15 (4) says this:

Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother-tongue (sic) or the language of the immediate community and, at a later stage, English.

Parents and the generality of the people are also charged to change their negative attitude towards their mother tongue, and encourage their children to speak same.

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