

# UTILITARIAN DIMENSIONS OF LANGUAGE IN THE MULTILINGUAL NIGERIAN CONTEXT

•Ayo Ogunsiji

## **Abstract**

Nigeria is a multilingual nation in which about four hundred indigenous languages co-exist, apart from exoglossic languages like English, French, Arabic and so on. In a situation like this, language planning and language policies become herculean because of some socio-cultural, political and demographic considerations. It is against this background that this paper examines the functions of the numerous languages existing in Nigeria. The paper reviews the dominance configuration which the English language enjoys over other languages in many domains such as education, politics, commerce and industry, broadcasting, national and international communication, science and technology, etc. However, it is contended that the indigenous languages too are relevant in these domains. It is therefore observed that the Nigerian linguistic space is wide enough for all the languages to operate without any chaos, provided appropriate policies that accord each language its prime of place are put in place. As the languages exist together criss-cross linguistic influences which will be of benefits to all stake-holders will continue to flourish. While the position of English in the country is not threatened, French too will appreciate in value and the indigenous languages will develop to play increasing roles. Nigeria cannot afford to disregard its indigenous languages if it truly wants to develop. Therefore, multilingualism should be accepted as the reality of our own period and place and should be employed as an asset rather than a liability.

## **Introduction**

According to Sapir (1963:8), "language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols". Going by this definition, language is an exclusive human possession which is socially acquired and which serves as a means of communication, making use of conventional

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\* Department of English, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

symbols. Although it may not be the only human means of communication, language is the primary means of human communication. Eva Engholm as cited by Adegbiya (1994: 139) captures the essence of language to man when he says "language is the key to the heart of a people..." To appreciate a group of people we have to go via its language.

The essence of language in man's life is not hidden because it is an important aspect of his culture. As Sapir (1963) says, language does not exist independent of culture. The relationship of language with culture is dual in nature in the sense that language is part of culture as well as a vehicle for the expression of culture. As an essential part of culture, language is more than a means of communication. According to Wallwork (1969:12), language is used:

- i) for phatic communion i.e. as a social regulator;
- ii) for ceremonial purposes;
- iii) as an instrument of action;
- iv) to keep records;
- v) to convey orders and information;
- vi) to influence people;
- vii) to enable self-expression; and
- viii) to embody and enable thought.

If this is the case, it becomes obvious that no human society can exist without language. Around the globe today, language is seen as an instrument of economic and political power. One effect of colonialism, especially in Africa, is the entrenchment of the language(s) of the colonial masters. This situation has contributed to the development of bilingualism/multilingualism in Africa. The development of multilingualism has compounded the problems of language planning and language policies in many African nations. Here, we consider the utilitarian



dimensions of language in the Nigerian multilingual context. There are enough roles for each of the numerous languages that exist in the country and the appreciation of each language and its roles in the linguistically pluralistic Nigerian environment is what we mean by the utilitarian dimensions of language in Nigeria. Our proposition is that multilingualism is a reality of our own place and period and it can be utilised to our full advantage if adequate planning and policies are put in place.

### ***The Language Situation in Nigeria***

The linguistic map of Nigeria depicts it as a multilingual nation. Multilingualism is a phenomenon of linguistic pluralism within a single polity. According to Stewart (1968:531), national multilingualism is the use of more than one language within a single polity. This phenomenon of multilingualism exists in varying degrees in all the major areas of the world, especially in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In particular terms, Stewart identifies India, Nigeria and Switzerland as Multilingual nations.

For some reasons, the estimates of the indigenous Nigerian languages vary from about 150 to 400 (Tengan, 1994: 131). To worsen the situation, these indigenous languages have various dialects, some of which lack mutual intelligibility to the extent that one cannot say for certain whether they should be regarded as dialects or separate languages. Out of these numerous languages, the government confers 'major language status' on three: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba out of, perhaps, political and demographic considerations. The three languages are somewhat regarded as regional lingua francas: Hausa in the North, Igbo in the East and Yoruba in the West. But the political arrangement of regarding some languages as major and others as minor does not go down well with the speakers of the so-called minority languages for the fear of being marginalized socially,

economically and politically. It is doubtful whether the speakers of the three major languages put together are more than the speakers of the so-called minority languages.

In addition to the numerous indigenous languages in Nigeria English, French, Arabic, German, Russian and Pidgin English. French, German, Arabic and Russian are all foreign languages which are taught in our schools and universities. English enjoys the status of a second language used extensively and across ethnic boundaries. French as at now serves very limited purposes although its profile is rising as there is a move to make it a second official language. Arabic is used mainly for religious purposes. Pidgin English flourishes mainly in commercial contexts and spoken, informal situations. It also serves as a lingual franca among the southern minorities and is also widely used in cosmopolitan cities like Lagos and Abuja for some obvious reasons. The reality as at now is that there is no indigenous language in Nigeria that cuts across regional boundaries. The English language feeds fat on this situation as it is fallen back on for many important roles in lieu of a truly national language.

### ***The Implantation of English in Nigeria***

The precise date the English language entered Nigeria is not yet known but as Adetugbo (1978) says, there are indications that the first use of the language might have predated its first known written use by Equiano in 1789 as well as its use by the British Christian missionaries and administrators. In other words, the language might have come to the place earlier than 18th Century or earlier than usually conceived. According to Adetugbo, places like Warri, Brass, Calabar and so on were the first to have contact with English and the English language. The preponderance of the elements of English in the Pidgin English



that served as a contact trade language along the coastal areas of Nigeria underscores the early contact of the coastal towns with English. Although some records indicate that Portuguese predated English in the coastal area of Nigeria, the latter, due to reasons not yet obvious, overshadowed the former even before the enactment of the British colonial rule in Nigeria (Adetugbo 1978). The probable reason one may adduce for this is that the influence of the Portuguese was limited to the coastal areas and some royal courts.

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that trade played a significant role in the implantation of English in Nigeria. The trans-Atlantic slave trade, for example, aided the firm establishment of the language in the area. For example, the slave traders used some form of the language to transact business with the local inhabitants, especially the intermediaries. And when the trade was abolished, some of the freed slaves were said to have found their way back to places like Badagry, Ota, Lagos, Abeokuta and so on where they helped to spread the knowledge of English which they had acquired.

If trade prepared the way for the foundation of English in the area that came to be known as Nigeria, Christian missionary activities and colonialism came to reinforce the spread of the language in the area. The missionaries and the administrators realised the enormity of the language problems they could encounter and consequently started to train interpreters. The introduction of Western education was to assist the missionaries and the colonists in their mission. The form of education that was introduced gave prominence to language-related activities like reading and writing in addition to arithmetic. Since then, the English language has been dominating our educational system and social life. It will not be wrong to say that the English

language was introduced to Nigeria mainly through diplomacy rather than force.

### ***Utilities of English in Nigeria***

Much has been written and said about the roles of the English language in Nigeria (e.g. Sybil-James 1979, Adekunle 1985). Therefore, it is not our intention here to engage in mere repetitions. However, it will be pertinent to remind us of the vital roles which the language plays in the country. The language enjoys dominance configuration in the fields of administration, education, commerce and industry, inter-ethnic and international communications, etc.

As the language of administration in Nigeria, serious government affairs at the three tiers of Federal, State and Local Governments are conducted in English. Government policies and official publications are made in English. The Nigerian constitution is written in English, although efforts are on now to translate the document into major indigenous languages. For anybody to play some meaningful roles in the present political dispensation in the country, he should have a fairly reasonable mastery of English.

The place of English in our educational system cannot be overemphasised. As stipulated in the National Policy on Education (1981), English is the medium of instruction right from the upper primary school. To "derive maximum benefits from our educational system, one should acquire a reasonable level of communicative competence in the language. Failure in English almost amounts to failure in education in the country.

The ability to speak English in Nigeria gives one socio-economic advantages in that one will be socio-economically mobile; one will be able to enjoy job mobility. Without this type



of job mobility, the national economy will be almost moribund. The language facilitates trans-tribal commercial activities.

The English language also serves as a medium of creative writing. Over the years, volumes of Nigerian literatures of English expression have been produced. In this direction, writers like Soyinka, Achebe, Okara, Clark, Osundare and so on are notable. They have succeeded in articulating their creative sensibilities through the medium of English, often with African colouration.

Furthermore, the English language performs integrative roles in Nigeria; it weds the different ethnic groups in the country together and paves the way for national integration and stability. Without national integration and stability, there cannot be any meaningful development. Stability in this context refers to the entrenchment of enduring philosophies and policies of good governance. In a nation like Nigeria, the integration of the diverse components will guarantee this form of stability which is seen as a criterion for development in the context of positive and purposeful changes aimed at improving the living condition of the generality of the people. For any meaningful national integration and stability in Nigeria, social, cultural, economic and political cohesion becomes imperative. Linguistically, Nigeria is a pluralistic entity. This condition is enough to engender disunity, disintegration and instability. At this period of its development more than ever before, the country is confronted with forces that threaten its corporate existence. The English language is therefore an important symbol of national unity in Nigeria; it is one of those things that bind the country together.

#### ***Implications of the utilities of English in Nigeria***

The roles of the English language in Nigeria have many implications. One of these is that it unites us in our diversity and

guarantees our continued existence as a nation. Secondly, the English language is now a world language and the development of the speech community of English on the Nigerian soil identifies us with a global speech community of English. With this, we share some universal values. This situation conditions and defines the attitude of the Nigerian speakers of English to the language. It helps them maintain what Wardhaugh (1986) refers to as 'a we-type solidarity' (Essein 1995: 281).

The extension of the speech communities of English across the world has some implications for the character of the language itself. This has led to the different varieties of the language in the world, one of which is the Nigerian English. Whether we like it or not, the English language has established itself firmly on the Nigerian soil and it is demonstrating its sensitivity to the Nigerian environment. This sensitivity to the socio-cultural milieu becomes more apparent in the lexico-semantics of the Nigerian English. New words and expressions are being coined daily to express the Nigerian linguo-cultural realities. It is against this background that we can understand expressions like 'June 12'; (the date of the annulled 1993 presidential election), 'a June twelver' (an apostle of June 12 presidential, election), 'step aside' (an expression used by General Ibrahim Babangida to describe his style of quitting office), 'four-one-nine' (high class fraud), 'operation sweep', 'operation wedge', 'presidential strike force' (all are security outfits). One will remember, we have also witnessed the eras of 'twelve-two-third' (the mathematical manoeuvring that saw the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) to power in 1979, 'penkelemes' (a term coined by a frontline Ibadan Politician, Alhaji Adelabu, to mean 'peculiar mess'), 'accord concordian' (spirit of compromise) and so on. Also we have acronyms like NEC (National Electoral Commission), INEC



(Independent National Electoral Commission), FAEP (Family Advancement Economic Programme), PEP (Poverty Eradication Programme) and so on. These expressions and their interpretations, among other things, express the Nigerianness of (the Nigerian) English. We therefore agree with Adegbija (1989:173) that one indication of the dynamism of Nigerian English is the formation of acronyms that can be regarded as typical Nigerian English acronyms.

Considering the global nature of the English language and the utilitarian dimensions of the language in Nigeria, 'the future of the language in the country seems certain. The English language across the globe today is the language of power e.g. social, economic, political, etc. power.

We should however, not close our eyes to the negative implications of the roles of the English language in Nigeria. For example, because English is seen as a language performing the role of a national language, the Nigerian government, language planners, some Nigerian linguists and so on do not seem to feel the necessity or the urgency for having a truly national language. There seems to be generally a feeling of complacency in this direction. This is the feeling that Professor Kola Owolabi, a linguist from the University of Ibadan, is working hard to correct.

Another effect of the dominance of English, especially in the field of education is the appalling rate of educational failure as a result of failure in the English language, particularly at the Senior School Certificate level. Some potential geniuses have been reduced to dropouts because of their inability to secure pass grades in the language. Unfortunately, in our educational arrangement, failure in English at this level almost amounts to academic failure. Elsewhere, many experts in the field of

education have attested to the crucial roles of child's indigenous language in the process of learning.

### ***The Utilities of Indigenous Languages***

The picture which we have painted so far of the language situation in Nigeria, reveals the dominance of English in many domains of use. But there is some danger in over-blowing the importance of English at the expense of the indigenous languages. Certainly, no other language can take the place of one's mother tongue. According to Cleavens as cited by Awoniyi (1978), the mother tongue is the language of a speech community which an individual acquires in early years and which becomes his instrument of thought and communication. One major instrument of a child's socialisation is its mother tongue. In the Nigerian context, the various indigenous languages perform this role. Even among some educated Nigerians, the mother tongues remain the medium of intimate communication at homes; they are the languages of customs and tradition.

In the realm of formal education, the indigenous languages are very much relevant. Although there is no articulate language policy yet, the National Policy on Education (1981) states that the medium of instruction in the primary school shall initially be the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community, but at a later stage English. The University of Ife (Now Obafemi Awolowo University) went empirical by teaching all the subjects (except English) in Yoruba in the selected primary schools in the University environment. The Ife six-year primary project was claimed to be a success as those taught in Yoruba were said to perform significantly better than their counterparts taught in English (Ojerinde 1986).



As characteristic of the Nigerian situation, however, there has not been a serious follow-up programme to the Ife project. This form of apathy is not conducive to meaningful language planning and language policy and by implication, meaningful development. This is one of the reasons genuine development has continued to elude us.

We cannot deny the fact that in the teaching and learning process in the multi-lingual Nigerian context, the indigenous languages play vital roles, especially in early education, since the children think first in their indigenous languages. Asobebe (1999: 5) reinforces this when he says that "education in the mother tongue removes all inhibitions that beset the use of a foreign language". Even in the teaching and learning of such languages as English and French in the Nigerian context, the mother tongues are not completely irrelevant. With the use of the direct method involving explanations, illustrations, demonstrations, etc. the teacher may not always succeed in passing some ideas across to the learners. Experience has shown that in such a situation, if the teacher understands the learner's mother tongue(s) and uses same, the communication barrier is often broken.

In creative arts, the indigenous languages are relevant. In the Nigerian contexts, many works of arts in the area of drama, prose and poetry have been produced in the indigenous languages. Some films have been produced in the indigenous languages also. Even in the larger African context, one can recall the activities of the celebrated East African writer, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o with his 'home-coming' crusade of using his indigenous language as the medium of his work. Some scholars believe strongly that the best for the African Literature is to be produced in the African indigenous languages. This is why Osundare

(1995) describes the attempt of African writers adopting foreign expressions as playing 'the Caliban's gamble'.

Also in the broadcasting industry (print and electronic) the indigenous languages serve as useful and relevant medium as news items are relayed in them; advertisements and jingles are equally made in them. There are also some newspapers and periodicals in indigenous languages e.g. "Ala roŷye" (Yorubá), "Wanchancha" i.e. the broom (Tiv), "Nzisa" (Igbo).

Since language is an important part of culture, our indigenous languages remain vital social tools in such areas/settings like customary courts, palaces of traditional rulers, traditional medicine, shrines, churches and mosques. The indigenous languages are still the main medium of settling disputes and conflicts among the majority of rural inhabitants. In fact, in Nigeria today, any sincere mass mobilisation programme should adopt the indigenous languages, which the ordinary people understand.

If the indigenous languages are still held (consciously or unconsciously) to be thus relevant, then care must be taken not to over-emphasise any policy that tends towards the marginalisation of any indigenous Nigerian language because no group will want its language to be dragged along the path of extinction. All the indigenous languages should be appreciated for what they are because languages are closely related to the psyche of the people who use them; to marginalize any language is to deflate the psyche of its native speakers. It is against this background that the efforts of some Nigerian linguists like Prof. Kola Owolabi in enhancing and modernizing the Nigerian indigenous languages should be appreciated (See Owolabi, 2004, 2006).



***Languages in Interaction in Nigeria***

Certainly, the linguistic picture of Nigeria as said earlier depicts plurality with the existence of such languages as the various indigenous languages and the exoglossic languages: e.g. English, French, Arabic; Pidgin English is also in the picture. Those languages are in active interaction on the Nigerian soil and in this situation they exhibit mutual influence. Languages are like human beings; no language can insulate itself against the influence of another. The effects of the interactions are usually felt at three major levels in the Nigerian context:

- a) The speech act of Nigerians and their social outlook;
- b) National issues;
- c) Literature and creative arts (including music).

'Foreign' languages, especially English have significant linguistic influence on the indigenous languages. According to Bamgbose, (1995:11), one obvious linguistic influence of English on the Nigerian languages is the existence of a large vocabulary of English in these languages which can be traced to loans or loan translations. Such items in the Yoruba language include 'titi' (street), 'diga' (digger), 'do ti' (dirty), 'sibi' (spoon), 'bure di' (bread), 'kilaasi' (class), 'rediô' (radio), 'telo ' (tailor), 'bareke' (barracks) and so on. Examples from Tiv language include 'gomna' (governor), 'matu' (motor), 'ladio' (radio), 'beledi' or 'bere di (bread). Instances of this phenomenon in Igbo language include 'telo ' (tailor), 'ko mputa' (computer), 'injini' (engine), 'dokita' (doctor). We regard this as a good thing for the corpus development of the indigenous Nigerian languages.

The indigenous languages also have some effects on the English language in Nigeria as some vocabulary items from

these languages have found their way into English. Examples include 'oba' (king), 'dodo' (fried plantain), 'iroko' (a type of tree) from Yoruba; 'seriki', 'megida' from Hausa and 'obi' (a royal title), 'ogbono' (a type of soup) from Igbo. According to Igboanusi, (2000:221), most of the loan words from indigenous languages "reflect titles, food, religion and traditional customs".

Such mutual influence also exists among the indigenous languages. For example, such items as 'alaafia', 'ankale', 'alubarika', 'alubosa', 'seriki', "daodu" which exist in Yoruba are loan words from Hausa. Also, the Nigerian Pidgin draws extensively from the Nigerian languages as its base languages. Such is the origin of items like 'wahala', 'katakata', 'wayo', 'ogogoro', 'megida' and so on in Nigerian Pidgin.

The interaction of the different languages on the Nigerian soil has also given rise to the phenomena of code-switching and code-mixing. Nowadays, hardly can any educated Nigerian have a sustained discourse especially in relaxed, informal contexts in English without mixing some elements of his indigenous language. There may be different motivations for code-mixing and code-switching, but the phenomena indicate the pluralistic nature of the Nigerian personality which is symptomatic of linguo-cultural hybridity.

On the national plane, the existence of numerous languages in Nigeria has generated issues like the demand for a truly national language, language policy, language in education, language for education, official language and, second official language and so on. Simply put, the trend points towards the need to demarcate the domains of the numerous languages to give a picture of multilingualism with diglossia.

In the aspect of literature and creative arts, the interaction of the different languages has led to the production of bilingual-



bicultural, multilingual-multicultural works. Prominent Nigerian writers like Soyinka, Achebe, Okara, Osofisan, Obafemi, Osundare, among others, have given the Nigerian writing new character by deliberately incorporating in their works, elements of indigenous culture and languages to forge new realities.

### ***The Question of a National Language in Nigeria***

The issue of a national language in Nigeria is a sensitive and controversial one. Like we mentioned earlier, none of the indigenous languages as of now has either the linguistic spread or the national acceptability to be accorded the status of a national language. Even the mere political recognition of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as major languages is beset with resentment from the speakers of the other languages for fear of being linguistically marginalized. This should be expected because people will normally exhibit linguistic loyalty towards their languages.

Much has been said about the desirability of a truly national language in Nigeria. There is no doubt that the country deserves a truly national language, but the modus operandi remains fuzzy. There seems to be at least two approaches: the gradual (i.e. evolutionary) (Adegbiya 1994) and the radical. Those who are in a hurry will advocate the radical approach. They may feel that the government should legislate one language as the Nigerian national language. However, this approach cannot work in our context. Any attempt to legislate any indigenous Nigerian language as a national language is bound to create chaos and aggravate the already seeming precarious existence of Nigeria as a single polity.

The first approach (i.e. the gradual/evolutionary) is more liberal, more pragmatic and more germane to the Nigerian linguistic environment. It seems to underlie the government

policy of making the Nigerian child learn one indigenous Nigerian language apart from his mother tongue. It seems the same approach informs the recognition of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as major Nigerian languages. Through these efforts an indigenous Nigerian language may evolve. But the minority languages should not be totally sidelined. Another approach is also identifiable and that is the adoption of an artificial language, which possibly will be an amalgam of many indigenous Nigerian languages. We regard this as a white elephant project because of what it will entail.

We support the first option in this paper (i.e. the gradual/ evolutionary). Adequate facilities and infrastructures should be put in place to facilitate the study of our indigenous languages. Our indigenous linguists and scholars should be encouraged to undertake research that can lead to the development of our indigenous languages. Adequate meta-languages should be developed for our languages and adequate text materials, produced in and on them (i.e. the languages). This is the responsibility from which we should not shy away. In Africa, we have our own technologies with their languages. These technologies cannot develop if we do not develop our indigenous languages. The orchestrated talk about technology transfer is a deception. However, developing these languages should not be seen as jettisoning the English language. In our situation, there are adequate roles for all the languages to perform. We should be linguistically pragmatic. This linguistic pragmatism dictates that we should not close our minds to the foreign languages, particularly English and French. In fact, in functional terms, English means more than a foreign language to us, it is our second language. In the same vein, the fact that we are surrounded by some French speaking countries makes it



imperative for us to accord French a reasonable degree of recognition. In our own case, multilingualism should be turned into an asset rather than a liability.

### **Conclusion**

The language situation in Nigeria is no doubt complex. According to Adegbija (2004:34), the situation is "intricate, complex, multi-faceted and extremely fluid" in structure. This complexity has conditioned ambivalent attitudes to the indigenous languages on one hand and the foreign languages on the other. Because of its global dominance configuration, the Nigerian people cherish English; but as symbols of their cultures they still exhibit linguistic loyalty to their indigenous languages. This is why no group will want its language marginalized. In the face of all this, viable language planning programme and language policy become a desideratum. The type of language planning programme that is relevant to the Nigerian context will be that which gives due consideration to all the available language planning variables and options and it should, of course, for the indigenous languages include corpus planning, status planning and acquisition planning (Cooper, 1989:31-33). Corpus planning will relate to the development of the 'characters' (forms) of the languages; status planning will deal with the utilitarian perception (importance) of the languages, while acquisition planning will border on increasing the number of users of the languages. In this direction, there is the need for pragmatism, unity of purpose and the will to act. In our own case, multilingualism should be channeled towards the positive perception of our realities for a better re-definition of our existence in the new world order. Globalization should not drag our indigenous languages along the path of extinction. In fact, in our multilingual context, the issue of language inequality, as

Bamgbose (2004: 11) advises should be redressed by re-distributing "functional allocation" between English and the indigenous Nigerian languages. The "value profiles" (Coupland 2003: 467) of our indigenous languages should also be made to appreciate reasonably at least locally while we keep tract with the emerging global tendencies.

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