

ENGLISH AND THE QUESTION OF NATIONAL LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examined the role of English language and the quest for a national language in Nigeria. Various hindrances to the choice of a national language in Nigeria were observed. These include; the dominant role of English language, political instability and multilingual nature of the country. The writer suggested that ‘the three big’, that is, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba should be selected as the national languages. It was also suggested that a credit pass in a student’s mother tongue and one of ‘the three big’ (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) should constitute the prerequisite for admission into Nigerian higher institutions*

KEY WORDS: English, National language, Nigerian languages.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, the giant of Africa, according to Wikipedia (2015), is the most populous country in Africa and the seventh most populous country in the world. It is the most populous country in the world in which the majority of the population is black. The country is bounded in the North by Niger Republic, and Lake Chad in the North East, in the East by Cameroon, in the West by Benin Republic and in the South by Atlantic Ocean. Nigeria has more than two hundred and fifty (250) ethnic groups with varying languages and customs. There are five hundred and ten (510) living languages spoken across the thirty-six (36) states of the federation. The largest ethnic groups are the Fulani/Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo accounting to sixty-eight per cent (68%) of the population, while the Edo, Ijaw, Kanuri, Ibibio, Ebir, Nupe, and Tiv comprise twenty-seven per cent (27%). Other minorities make up the remaining five per cent (05%). The major languages in Nigeria are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

Nigeria is a member of both Commonwealth of Nations and African Union. The country gained independence from the United Kingdom on October 1, 1960. Nigeria is a multilingual nation, and as such, it finds it difficult to adopt any of its indigenous languages as its lingua franca. Therefore, English language plays a lot of roles in the country.

The Quest for a National Language in Nigeria

A national language, according to Wikipedia (2015), is a language (or a language variant) which has certain connections or attachments with a people and perhaps, the territory they occupy. In most cases, it stands for the national identity of a nation or a country. There are lots of countries with their national languages, Algeria has Arabic as its national language; Bulgaria has Bulgarian language as its national language. Bangali is the national language in Bangladesh. Kenya has Swahili as its national language.

Most multilingual nations of the world have no national languages. However, the constitutions of most of these nations gave room for a widely spoken language in which majority of its speakers can read and

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write as their national languages. For instance, South Africa has no national language but has eleven (11) official languages; namely Afrikaans, English, Ndebele, North Sotho, Sotho, Swazi, Tswana, Tsonga, Venda, Xhosa and Zulu.

Nigeria has five hundred and ten (510) living languages, and as such, it would rather be difficult if not impossible to adopt all the languages as national or official languages. Therefore, the country recognizes the language of “the three majority”; these are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Each of the languages has some 25 million speakers or there about. English language is recognized as the official language in Nigeria.

The recognition of “the three big” languages had generated a lot of controversies among the speakers of Edo, Efik, Fulani, Idoma, Ijaw, Ijaw, Kanuri, Itsekiri, Urhobo-Isoko, Igala, Igbira, Nupe, Ibibio, Gwari, Tiv, Birom, Margi, Jukun and Katab. They opine that any of their own indigenous languages could as well be selected as a national language. This has led to serious agitation among the speakers of other minor languages and rejection of “the three big” languages. That is, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as the national languages

Nigeria is not a complex nation as a result of the heterogeneous ethnic groups or races that exist in the country, but as a result of the multiple linguistic backgrounds of the inhabitants of the nation. The issue of the national language has been a major concerns to various authors and writers including, Adedimeji (2005) and Umunna (2006). Some of the writers have suggested that one of the three major languages should be selected as the national language. This however, is likely to create serious problem, especially among the speakers of the “three big languages”. There is the tendency that what is happening in China currently occur in Nigeria if any of the three major languages is selected as the national language

In China, Thomson Reuters (2014) observed that over four hundred million people can not speak *Mandarin*, their national language while large numbers of the rest of the country speak it badly. However, every effort is being directed towards promoting Mandarin in China. ‘Mandarin’ is held every year since 1998. Nigeria situation is more complex as there are five hundred and ten (510) living languages in the country. This has been responsible for nation’s inability to come out boldly with a national language as the case of Mandarin in China

Switzerland, according to [swiss info.ch](http://swiss.info.ch). retrieved on 15/9/2014 has four national languages; French, German, Italian and Romansh. German is spoken by about sixty four per cent (64%), while about twenty per cent (20%) of the population speak French. Seven per cent (07%) make use of Italian in communication while Romansh is spoken by less than one per cent (01%) of the total population. English, though not accepted as the official language, is the language that is used to bridge the gap among the people using the national languages.

The Federal Government of Nigeria is yet to declare the national language(s) of Nigeria. Some writers, such as Odumu (1989), Igboanusi and Ohia (2001), Idiagbon (2002) and Akinbote, Oduolowu and Ogunsanwo (2003) have stressed the need for the Federal Government to make a policy statement on the issue of the national language. Omunnah (2006) declared that the fact that Nigeria is still using English language as its national language by application reveals an appalling state of the nation’s psyche about its identity and direction as a republic. He advised that Nigeria should choose one language or use the big three (BT) Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as its national language.

Hindrances to the choice of a National language in Nigeria

There are many factors that continue to make the choice of a national language in Nigeria a mirage, among these are:

- (i) Dominant role of the English language
- (ii) Political instability
- (iii) The multilingual nature of Nigeria

Dominant role of English language

This is a major problem in the choice of a national language in the country.

Various writers, including Adegbija (1989), Williams (1990), Alebiosu (1991), Lawal (1995), Akindele and Adegbite (1999) and Makinde (2001) had stressed the role and importance of English language in Nigeria. Foyewa (2012) observed that the educational ordinance of (1926) elevated English to an enviable position. Since then, English language dominated every aspect of Nigeria life. English is the official language in Nigeria. It is the language of law, commerce and business, religion, advertisement and so on.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) provision for language in the curriculum can be said to enhance English language in the primary and secondary schools. The medium of instruction in the post secondary schools in Nigeria is English language. Lectures are delivered in English, textbooks are written in the language. Workshops, seminars and conferences are organized with English language as the medium of communication. Adedimeji (2005) observed the unifying role of English in Nigeria. According to him, 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 languages of relevance, from the competitors for the purpose of unifying the nation. Fortunately or unfortunately, according to him, English has emerged as that privileged language without which the unity of Nigeria as a nation is mostly improbable, if not outrightly impossible.

The language is used in Nigerian markets. It is the language used in business interactions. Advertisement of various kinds is made in English language. It is the language of media in the country. Various kinds of news are delivered on radio and television stations in English with a few exceptions in the indigenous languages.

Since no indigenous language can function in this capacity that English language functions, it will be difficult, if not impossible to substitute English language with any of the indigenous languages. Therefore, selecting a national language other than English will be difficult in Nigeria context.

Political instability:

Nigeria has witnessed a lot of political instability. In the fifty-four (54) years of its independence, military ruled for thirty-four (34) years. The remaining twenty (20) years witnessed four (04) different governments in power. In such a situation, it is usually difficult for any government in power to make a declarative statement on sensitive issues like the national language, put necessary machinery in motion and implement it successfully. Before such declaration gets to the implementation stage, the government would be out of power. Nigeria practices rotational in her presidential system of government between the north and the south. Any attempt by the president produced by the northern part of the country to

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make a move towards the choice or selection of a national language will be condemned by the southerners, especially if the choice favours a language from the north. Likewise, any effort put in place by any president from the southern part of the country towards the choice or selection of a national language will be condemned by the northerners, especially if the choice does not favour them.

Therefore, every government in power is usually silent on the choice of a national language, especially when a neutral language, that is, English, can function in that capacity. This is done to win support from every geo-political zone of the country and also to avoid undue tension in the country. Beside that, any policy statement made by a government usually ends with the government regime. Therefore, there is no continuity in power. New government usually ushers in new policy and new agenda.

Multi-lingual Nature of the Country

This is another major hindrance to the choice or selection of a national language in Nigeria. It has earlier been established in the introductory part of this work that Nigeria has about five hundred and ten (510) living languages spoken across the thirty-six (36) states of the federation. The few popular ones include Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba (the big three), Others are Edo, Efik, Fulani, Idoma, Ijaw, Kanuri, Itsekiri, Urhobo-Isoko, Igala, Igbira, Nupe, Ibibio, Gwari, Tiv, Biron, Margi, Jakun and Katab. There are other four hundred and eighty-nine (489) indigenous languages not mentioned here.

There is usually mutual suspicion among the speakers of various indigenous languages in the country whenever it comes to decision making on languages. As a result of this, decision makers are usually conscious of the safety and security of the country which may be threatened. The multilingual nature of the country therefore is a major threat in the choice or selection of a national language in Nigeria.

The Way Forward

A national language has earlier been described a language (or a language variant) which has certain connections or attachments with a people and perhaps the territory they occupied. According to Wikipedia (2015), it stands for the national identity of a nation or a country. With all these descriptions and definitions of a national language, English is not qualified to be the Nigeria national language because it does not have any affiliation with any of the indigenous languages. It is the language of the former colonial masters.

The three big, that is, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are spoken across the country. The Hausa language is widely spoken in the Northern part of the country while Igbo is a major language spoken in the Eastern part of the country. Yoruba is spoken in the Western part of the country and it is the major language spoken in the region. Therefore, Nigeria should intensify efforts towards the spread of the three major languages. Other indigenous languages speakers in the Northern part of Nigeria should be encouraged to master the Hausa language. Likewise, other indigenous languages speakers in the Eastern part of the country should learn Igbo language. Yoruba is the major language in the Western part of the country though with different varieties.

Therefore, the three major languages in Nigeria, that is, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba should be chosen as the national language in Nigeria since Switzerland has four national languages, which are French, German, Italian and Roman, Nigeria could also have three indigenous languages as its national languages. There should be a policy statement on the choice of the national language(s). A student should be compelled

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to register for and pass his/her mother tongue and any other one of the three major languages at Ordinary level examination. Therefore, a credit pass in a child's mother tongue and one of the three bigs should be pre-requisite for admission into Nigerian universities and other higher institutions of learning. This will help in the spread of the three indigenous languages in the country and make them acceptable to the speakers of other indigenous languages as national languages indeed.

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