Original Research Article

Nigerian Languages in the Tangled Web of Language Attitudes

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Abstract

The position of English as the language of instruction in Nigeria is informed by the Education Ordinance of 1882. In multilingual Nigeria, English remains a dominant language as indigenous languages in the country suffer from the threats of negative language attitudes. This paper is immersed in the sociolinguistics of multilingual Nigeria in terms of the co-existence of English and indigenous languages in the country. Nigeria is a mega speech community, where there is need for English and Nigerian languages to co-exist in nation-building. However, negative language attitudes do not facilitate a framework for such co-existence. This study explores Stewart's 1968 attributes for language classification. Questionnaires (see appendix) were administered to 40 respondents: teachers, parents and students. The study finds out that there is need to evolve a forward-looking, germane policy framework not only for the co-existence of English and Nigerian languages, but also for engaging indigenous languages in Nigeria in important spheres of nationhood, as this will foster national development.

Keywords: language attitude, Nigeria, sociolinguistics, multilingualism, Stewart, National Policy on Education

1. INTRODUCTION

Crystal (1971) notes that language is "the systematic conventional use of sounds, signs or written symbols in a human society for communication and self-expression." Language conveys the values and socio-cultural nuances of society across ethnic and occupational lines. Smith Jr. (1979, p. 9) opines that language is "a learned, shared, and arbitrary system of vocal symbols through which human beings in the same speech community or sub-culture interact and hence communicate in terms of their common cultural experience and expectations." The communication function of language empowers it to operate as an agent of national development. Igboanusi (2001, p. 13) notes that Nigerian languages are classified into major and minor ones based on: population of speakers, educational consideration, geographical expanse of speaking territories and publications in different disciplines. In this study, the relationship that English has with Nigerian languages is examined critically within the context of diverse language attitudes, and the implications of such attitudes not only on indigenous languages in Nigeria, but also on national development.

2. Language Planning in Multilingual Nigeria

Weinstein (1980, p. 56) defines languages planning as "a government authorized long term sustained and conscious efforts to alter a language1." Akindele and Adegbite (1999, p. 59, cited in Egwuogu, 2017, p. 51) defines language planning as "a set of deliberate activities systematically designed to select from, organize and develop the language resources of a community in order to enhance the utilization of such resources for development. Language planning is necessitated by the multilingual states… to integrate the region or country and promote encompassing

development." The language policy evolved by the 1991 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria was not widely accepted.

Three perspectives abound in the literature as far as language policy in Nigeria is concerned (Cf. Morakinyo, 2015, pp. 157-158):

The Nationalist Orientation
Proponents of the Nationalist Orientation argue that engaging Nigerian language as a National Language to replace English is a nationalist move – an expression of national pride in Nigeria's sovereignty and socio-cultural nuances.

The Internationalist Perspective
Those who contend for this perspective hold the view that English is neutral and satisfactorily developed to perform two roles: unite the people of Nigeria and cope with the challenges of globalization. The critics of this view believe that the dominance of English in Nigeria is inimical to the future of indigenous languages in the country.

The Neutralist Position
The Neutralist view is advocated, with the suggestion of Nigerian Pidgin as a National Language due to its neutrality, communicative potential in casual discourses and potency in national cohesion. However, some scholars do not think Nigerian Pidgin is suitable as Nigeria's National Language.

Egwogu (2017, pp. 54-56) cites Farinde and Ojo (2005, p. 47) who examine language policies that have been proposed for Nigeria:

The African Option
Swahili was proposed by Wole Soyinka in 1977 at the International Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC). Unfortunately, critics of this proposal hinged their criticism on the fact that Swahili is not a Nigerian language.

The Artificial Option
There is the belief that an artificial language is ethnically neutral, and can therefore perform a unifying role in multilingual Nigeria. Unfortunately, an artificial language cannot cope terminologically – given its limited lexicon – with the challenges of globalization.

The Endoglossic Option
A well-developed Nigerian language – in terms of lexicon, grammar and literary publications – is believed to be suitable as a National Language. However, there are those who contend that all Nigerian languages have divisive potentials.

Pidgin Option
Proponents of Nigerian Pidgin as a National Language strongly hold the view that Pidgin is neutral and is widely spoken across social class. Many scholars agree that it plays vital roles in national cohesion and nation-building.

The Exoglossic Option
Scholars who contend for an exoglossic option as a language policy for Nigeria, want English to be entrenched as Nigeria's National Language because apart from being void of ethnic sentiments, its vocabulary and grammar are developed. But critics think English remains a colonial heritage, and a danger to Nigerian languages.

The Indexop Option
Another language policy proposed for Nigeria is the Indexop Policy. Egwogu (2017, p. 56) contends that this policy gives equal opportunities to endoglossic languages in status and corpus planning. The National Policy on Education (1977) which was revised in 1981 and 2004 legislated the use of the three major Nigerian languages alongside English at different levels of formal education. The role of English was legislated clearly in formal education, but the role of indigenous languages is continually de-emphasized.

Below are some of the flaws of the National Policy on Education as cited in Dada (2010, p. 421):
  i)   Don't the statements on language constitute just a statement of intent rather than a serious programme for implementation?
  ii) If the mother tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate community is considered so important at the pre-primary level as an integral part of the child's culture and the link between the home and the school, why should it be "principal" and not "solely" used at this level?
  iii) How do people identify the language(s) of the immediate community in pluralistic settings like urban centres or international communities like universities?
  iv) Aren't the pronouncements on the three major languages vague and effeminate?
  v)   Further on the choice of language, by whom and at what level is the choice of one of the three languages to be made? By the Federal, State or Local Government? By the parents, the school, or the pupils?

vi) If the government is serious about implementing the policy, shouldn't there be a definite chrogram for all states to follow in the implementation of the language provisions couched in cautious escape phraseology: 'subject to the availability of teachers?

vii) If the government considers the learning of the three crucial for national integration, where are the legal and other sanctions for defaulting Federal, State and Local Governments or their agencies?

viii) Practically, all Nigerian languages can be used as mother tongues or language(s) of immediate communities. Is it pedagogically feasible to organize initial literacy in 400 odd languages?

ix) How do just three or the major languages serve the need of the educational process and become the media for preserving the people's cultures?

x) The total number of teachers required in 1988 for the three major Nigerian languages was 55, 237. Only 6, 383 or 11.6 % of these were available. How and where are the remaining 48, 854 teachers to be produced? Is the recruitment or training of these teachers to be by chance or to a coordinated programme involving all agencies concerned?

Dada (2010, 418) reports that "the recent 2005 Ethnologic Data listed 521 languages for Nigeria. Of these, 510 are living languages, 2 are second languages without mother tongue speakers, and 9 are extinct." Nigerian languages are grouped as "major languages, state languages and local languages based on their status as dominant languages, their territorial spread and the population that speaks them" (Cf. Brain, 1992, cited in Dada, 2010, p. 418).

Positive attitudes towards English propagated it in formal education and nationhood. Parents encouraged their children to learn the language. Job opportunities were tied to it. It was a basis for administrative and political appointments. Phillipson (1992) notes that, "the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages." His position is that English oppresses other languages with its status as a language of modern ideas, science and technology.

3. Language Attitudes

Language attitudes negatively affect Nigerian languages. Adegbija (2004, p. 54) submits that "attitudes towards languages are motivated by several factors including their socio-economic value, their status-raising potentials, their perceived instrumental value, their perceive esteem, their perceived functions or roles in the nation, their numerical strength, the perceived political and economic power of its speakers, their use in the official domains, their educational value, etc. Generally, positive attitudes, covert or overt, are developed towards a language that is perceived to have value in all these different areas …"

Language attitudes come from different sources and take diverse forms. In schools:

a. Students mock their colleagues who speak indigenous languages; vernacular-speaking students are even given nick names;

b. speaking vernacular is prohibited;

c. Speakers of vernacular are punished;

d. Vernaculars are excluded from school-organized competitions; and

e. Awards are given for best performance in English, not in indigenous languages. In homes:

    a. Parents regard English, but disregard Nigerian languages;

    b. Some parents do not want their children to associate with their vernacular-speaking peers;

    c. Parents view good spoken English as evidence of their children's academic progress;

    d. Many parents see villages and their vernacular-speaking population as people alienated from modern civilization;

    e. Many parents equate vernacular-speaking with illiteracy;

    f. Parents view villages as habitations of witches and wizards, and therefore resist the language spoken by villagers;

    g. Many parents do not speak vernacular to their children even though they are competent in speaking the language;

    h. Many parents do not buy school-recommended vernacular textbooks for their children;

    i. Successive generations of families are exposed to English alone;

The spheres of society where language attitudes operate are too numerous to mention. Indeed, language attitude is a complex issue in the literature of sociolinguistics because of the sensitive nature of language ties.

4. Theoretical Framework

In this study, we explore Stewart's (1968) attributes for language classification cited in Bosede (1999) to make a clear presentation of the varieties, functions and developmental implications of languages in Nigeria. According to Stewart (ibid.) attributes for classifying languages in a multilingual society include:

Standardisation: This has to do with codification and acceptance of a particular speech form in the multilingual speech community.

Autonomy: The users must accept it as an independent language from other languages or varieties; while English/French possess autonomy, one cannot say that Pidgin English is autonomous from Standard English.

Historicity: This has to do with language tradition. That is, the language must be associated with the origin of a particular people or social group. English language possesses historicity while artificial language and Pidgin do not.

Vitality: The function of a speech form within the living community of native speakers is known as "vitality". Having native speakers is a prerequisite for a speech form to possess vitality. Therefore, dead and artificial languages lack vitality.

5. Methodology

The survey research approach is used in this study. In this regard, questionnaires were administered to two categories of respondents: teachers and students of secondary schools. This approach will suffice for the phenomena under investigation, because the statements in the questionnaire are appropriate. The questionnaire is structured with a four-scale rating: Agree (A), Strongly Agree (SA), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). The items were interpreted (analyzed) using critical and relevant insights from the literature.

6. Analysis, Results and Discussion

This section presents the analysis of the contents of the questionnaires, results and discussion.

In Item One, 25% of respondents agree (henceforth "the affirmative") that "language attitudes affect the promotion of Nigerian languages." The 60% that strongly agree puts 85% of the respondents on the affirmative. Therefore, the negative effects of language attitudes on the promotion of Nigerian languages is too significant to ignore.

In Item Two, no single respondent disagrees (henceforth non-affirmative) that "government has roles to play in the protection and development of Nigerian languages." This being the case, government at all levels should be key players in the move to rescue indigenous languages in Nigeria from the over-dominance of English.

Only 2 (5%) out of 40 respondents agree that "most literate Nigerians are competent in speaking and writing in their native languages". So long as only 4 of the respondents (10%) strongly agree to this item, the situation regarding literacy in mother tongues is pitiable. It is quite worrisome that 85% (Disagree plus Strongly Agree) of the respondents do not accept that "most literate Nigerians are competent in speaking and writing in their native languages". Indigenous languages continue to suffer disregard. Indeed, there are worrisome school-related language attitudes: proficiency in English is viewed as literacy; proficiency in English is an advantage in getting top school administrative positions; schools oppress indigenous languages with the bold inscriptions: VERNACULAR-SPEAKING IS PROHIBITED and SPEAK ONLY IN ENGLISH; vernacular-speaking is viewed as a characteristic of public schools.

In Item Four, only 14% (the total of those who agree and strongly agree) are in the affirmative to the statement. This response implies that the major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) are also entangled in the web of negative language attitudes. Therefore, language planning decisions have to be more decisive and forward-looking.

In Item Five, 55% of the respondents disagree and 15% of them strongly disagree that "Nigerian languages are not useful for nation-building". Thus, the possible roles of indigenous languages in Nigeria is acknowledged by Nigerians themselves. The government should evolve the framework for effective language revitalization so that alongside English, Nigerian languages can be meaningfully engaged in important spheres of society: education, media, politics, etc.

It is evident in Item Six, that 18 (45%) and 14 (35%) of the respondents are in the affirmative that "it takes multiple approaches to deal with the negative effects of language attitudes". Only 2 (5%) and 6 (15%) of the respondents do not agree to the statement (in terms of the two levels: "Agree" and "Strongly Agree"). This situation means that collective efforts are necessary to pull Nigerian languages out of the tangled web of negative language attitudes.

If developed, Nigerian languages can cope meaningfully with the various functions of language: interactive function (Language is used for communication among human beings); domain-based functions (governance, administration, journalism, education); international diplomacy (language is used to strengthen bonds among nations of the world); lingua-franca (in a multilingual nation like Nigeria, a lingua franca is used for: nationism and nationalism). Nigerian languages need standardization.

Language standardization (codification) is the process whereby a government agency establishes a framework for promoting languages through codification (institutionalized spelling forms, pronunciation and grammar). Wardhaugh R. and Janet M. Fuller (2015, p. 34) submit that "standardization refers to the process by which a language has been codified in some way. That process usually involves the development of such things as grammars, spelling books, and dictionaries, and possibly a literature … We can often associate specific items or events with standardization, for example, Whycliffe's and Luther's translation of the Bible into English and German, respectively, Caxton's establishment of printing in England, and Dr. Johnson's dictionary of English published in 1755. Standardization requires that a measure of agreement be

achieved about what is in the language and what is not." This study believes that language attitude is crucial in language policy decisions. Bosede Sotiloye, cited in Ore Yusuf (1992, pp. 146-147) examines some language attitudes:

i)   Home attitude;
ii) Ethnocentric attitude;
iii) anomie; and
iv) bilingual setting attitudes.

For perspectives on each of these language attitudes, see Ore Yusuf (1992, pp. 146-147).

Nigerian languages can foster national development because the cultural nuances of Nigerians are expressed in the languages. Language is made to demonstrate its functional potency in society when the dynamic social nuances that are invoked by the users are brought to the fore. It is unthinkable to talk about the adoption of one accessible indigenous language that is capable of enhancing the development of the country, when even the major Nigerian languages are suffering from the threat of negative language attitudes.

Dada (2010, p. 422) presents the following as the strategies employed by the Federal Government for the implementation of the National Policy on Education:
-   L1 Primary School Curricula (NERC, 1982-3);
-   L2 and L1 JSS Curricula (NERC, 1982-4);
-   L1 SSS Curricula (NERC, 1975-6);
-   L1 TTC Curricula (NTI 1986);
-   Primary Science Terminology (NLC, 1980-3);
-   Legislative Terminology (NLC, 1980-88);
-   Metalanguage for the three major Nigerian languages (NERC, 1981);
-   Braille Orthography (NERC, 1981-4);
-   Orthography Manuals and Pan-Nigerian typographic resources (NLC, on-going);
-   L1 Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba SSC Exam Syllabus (WAEC, 1985-6; 1991).

To broaden the lexicon of Nigerian languages, scholarly works have been published.
Dada (2007) submits that the reasons why Nigerian are not learning any other indigenous language in addition to their mother tongue are that:
-   English is compulsory for every Nigerian, being the de Facto official language in the bureaucracy and all tiers of formal education in Nigeria and as an international language for that matter.
-   The utilitarian value (socially, economically and academically) of the English language vis-à-vis any of our indigenous languages is high.
-   The over bearing status of the English language over the indigenous languages in Nigeria today makes even mother tongue learning a perfunctory exercise.

Egwuogu (2008, p. 15), cited in Egwuogu (2017, p. 48) reports that "the three major indigenous languages enjoy greater prominence in the national life of the country than others as each is spoken as Mother Tongue (MT) in not less than seven out of the 36 States of the Federation. The minority languages are used for local communication, being restricted to the primary domains of life (Webb, 1994, p. 181) such as informal or interpersonal relations, local markets, traditional social institutions and religion (Igboanusi, 2002, p. 13). However, some of them occupy important positions as they are seen beyond the country e.g. Fulfulde, or studied as subjects in schools e.g. Efik. The fact that the major languages in Nigeria have been significantly developed in terms of their lexicon, grammar and literature, makes it logical to conclude that the neglected ones have the potentials to be developed; their internal systems are not strange. Indigenous languages are being used for radio and television broadcast. Furthermore, advertisements are carried out in some of these indigenous languages and even the print media e.g. newspapers and published in them, especially the big three."

The age-long problem with language issues in Nigeria is lack of sincerity to promote indigenous languages. In this regard, teachers, students, parents and governments are to blame. Salawu (2006, p. 2) submits: that "for any African that is concerned for the soul and survival of his language, there must be a deliberate and sincere effort to learn and teach the language…"

A forward-looking language policy for Nigeria, is indeed, urgent. However, as scholars have noted, the psychological context, must not be ignored in the formulation and implementation of language policies in the country[3].

9. Conclusion

Despite the language policy evolved for Nigeria, English studies have not been impressive. The view has been expressed that failure to use indigenous languages effectively as medium of instruction in schools, is responsible for poor teaching of various subjects including English.

This study examines the impacts of language attitudes in Nigeria from a sociolinguistic perspective. The study reviews the historical underpinnings of the English language in Nigeria, and the continued dominance of the language over Nigerian languages. A major implication of such dominance is that true national development cannot be achieved unless indigenous languages in Nigeria, particularly the major ones are developed and assigned critical domain-based functions. This proposal implies that the different language attitudes that bedevil the recognition and promotion of Nigerian languages must be nipped in the bud via the sincere efforts of all stakeholders.

Notes

1. For Koul (2006, p. 27) language planning "denotes a deliberate attempt in resoling language-related problems necessary for the development of a particular language."
2. Owolabi (2006, pp. 20-22) presents the following:

   i)   A Glossary of Technical Terminology for Primary Schools in Nigeria (henceforth, GTTPSN).
        The GTTPSN comprises mathematical and scientific terms in Edo, Efik-Ibibio, Hausa, Igbo, Izon (a form of Ijo), Kanuri, Yoruba and Tiv. Areas covered by the work, which was sponsored by the Federal Ministry of Education, are sets, numbers, operations, geometry, measurement, physical science and biological science.

   ii) Metalanguage (henceforth, ML): There is ML for each of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba for the purpose of facilitating the teaching and learning of each of these three languages in its own medium. The terms cover various aspects of linguistics (e.g. phonetics, phonology, syntax, sociolinguistics, etc.) as well as stylistics, literature (including culture) and methodology. The project was sponsored by the Nigerian Educational Research Council (NERC), now (NERDC).

   iii) A Quadrilingual Glossary of Legislative Terms (henceforth QGLT): The QGLT is an assemblage of terms in English and their equivalents in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The Project, which was facilitated by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), covers a wide range of areas which legislative discourse can be centred on (e.g. education, politics, revenue collection and allocation, industrial, commercial or agricultural development, information, sports, etc.).

   iv) Yoruba Dictionary of Engineering Physics (henceforth, YDEP): YDEP is a bilingual English-Yoruba/Yoruba English dictionary. Apart from its main entries on Engineering Physics, the dictionary also contains entries on physical laws, rules, theorems and principles as an appendix.

3. This view corroborates Bello, Ahmadu and Bulkarima (2008, p. 4) who note that "in the Nigerian experience, most conflicts can be somehow linked to identity or ethnicity, the strong index of which is language."

Appendix
QUESTIONNAIRE

Section A.

Dear Respondents,

We are conducting research titled "Nigerian Languages in the Tangled Web of Language Attitudes". This questionnaire is designed to facilitate the research. Your responses to this instrument will not only be appreciated, but will also be treated confidentially.

Shittu Fatai
   and
Acheoah John Emike
(Researchers)

Section B

This section of the questionnaire presents a four-item rating scale: A (Agree); SA (Strongly Agree); D (Disagree); and S (Strongly Disagree)

Rating Scale					
Statement		**A**	**SA**	**D**	**SD**
1.	Language attitudes affect the promotion of Nigerian languages.	10 (25%)	24 (60%)	4 (10%)	
2.	Government has roles to play in the protection and development of Nigerian languages.	32 (80%)	8 (20%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
3.	Most literate Nigerians are competent in speaking and writing in their native language.	2 (5%)	4 (10%)	28 (70%)	6 (15%)
4.	Major Nigerian languages do not suffer from the negative effects of language attitudes.	8 (20%)	6 (15%)	24 (60%)	2 (5%)
5.	Nigerian languages are not useful for nation-building.	8 (20%)	4 (10%)	22 (55%)	6 (15%)
6.	It takes multiple approaches to deal with the negative effects of language attitudes.	18 (45%)	14 (35%)	2 (5%)	6 (15%)
7.	The sources of language attitudes in Nigeria are diverse.	32 (80%)	8 (20%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
8.	Positive attitudes towards a language enhance its recognition.	12 (30%)	24 (60%)	4 (10%)	0 (0%)
9.	English language can co-exist with Nigerian languages.	26 (65%)	12 (30%)	2 (5%)	0 (0%)

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