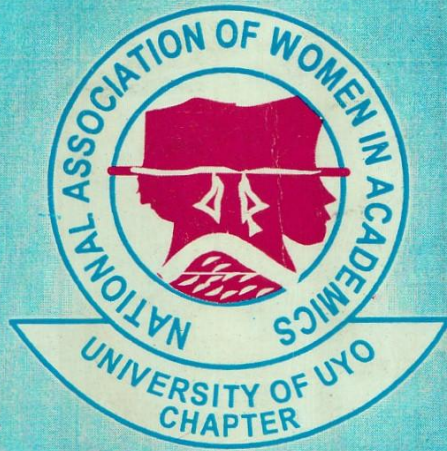


UJOWACS

ISSN 1595-6415

University of Uyo Journal of Women Academics



Motto: Empowerment, Development and Excellence

August 2000

BILINGUALISM, TRILINGUALISM OR QUADRILINGUALISM: THE LANGUAGE SITUATION OF THE NIGERIAN CHILD

BY

INYANG M. UDOFOT

Department of English, University of Uyo.

ABSTRACT

The National Policy on Language in Education recommends for the Nigerian child the mother tongue and/or the language of the immediate community in early childhood; English and one of Nigeria's major languages including the mother tongue of the child in later childhood. This means that by the age of twelve, the Nigerian child has been progressively bilingual, trilingual and in some cases quadrilingual. This paper examines the implications of and incidence on the intellectual development of the Nigerian child of having to learn many languages so early in life and having to study in one of them. The plight of the Nigerian child which emerges from the discussion seems to be that the Nigerian child does not master his mother tongue before learning a second and other languages. Consequently, he lacks proficiency in both the mother tongue and the second language which happens to be the language of instruction in schools. This deficiency adversely affects his capacity for abstract and logical reasoning resulting in poor academic performances. The paper recommends among other measures the use of the mother tongue in teaching throughout primary school and the teaching of the second language only by trained teachers, not by parents and nannies.

1. Introduction

The National Policy on language in education which was formulated in 1977 and revised in 1981 recommends for the Nigerian child the following: the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community, one of the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) and English. The policy further recommends that the first three years of primary education be in the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and the rest of the child's formal education in English while one of the three major languages should be learnt in the secondary school. It further stipulates that English be learnt right from the first year of primary school.

The National Policy on language therefore apparently encourages the Nigerian child to be monolingual in the first six years of life; bilingual in the first eight years; trilingual and quadrilingual by the age of twelve when he starts secondary school. In practice however, very few Nigerian children even in rural areas are monolingual at anytime. At birth, they acquire the parents' mother tongue if both parents have a common language. If they do not, such children acquire one of the parent's mother tongues (at times both of them) and/or English. If any of these languages is not the language of the immediate community which is supposed to be used in teaching in the first three years of primary school, the child is confronted with yet another language

and English the first year he starts schooling and adds one of the three recommended languages to the collection if he is neither Igbo nor Yoruba nor Hausa.

The questions arising from this state of affairs which this paper intends to address are: Given the three or four languages in his repertoire which one is the Nigerian child likely to be more proficient in and what is the incidence of this situation on his language development? What is the language of thought of the average Nigerian child? For the Nigerian child who learns English first from his parents and nannies before being allowed to acquire the language of the immediate environment which of them is his mother tongue? Is the proficiency of the Nigerian child who speaks English first before any other language and is taught this language by his parents and others who are not trained language teachers the same as that of an English child who acquires English as a mother tongue in an English speaking environment? And finally is the Nigerian child from the linguistic circumstances in Nigeria truly bilingual, trilingual, quadrilingual or haphazardly and superficially multilingual?

2. Bilingualism and the Nigerian situation

One is said to be bilingual if he has a near native speaker's competence in two languages. This is of course an ideal situation which is very rare if it exists at all. It is more common for one to have a more than average competence and is able to use both languages in almost any situation. He would then be seen as a compound or coordinate bilingual. If, on the other hand, one of the languages becomes dominant and the other subordinate, the use of the subordinate language involves a process of translation from the dominant language (cf Lyons 1981: 282). Experience shows that the person tends to think in the dominant language and translate his thoughts to the subordinate language particularly in unfamiliar subjects. The individual who goes on to learn a third and fourth languages either concurrently with or progressively after the mother tongue and the second language is therefore trilingual and quadrilingual. The question of equal competence in three or four languages is however a subject of debate.

Nigeria, unlike some countries (for example Canada and Belgium which are officially bilingual) is multi-lingual in the sense that it has more than four hundred languages spoken within its borders and English as the official language. A Nigerian child who acquires his parent's language at birth, speaks only this language till the age of six when he starts primary school (if there is such a child) and learns English from then or to the end of his university or any other form of tertiary education can be said to be close to coordinate bilingualism. The same thing is the case for a Nigerian who starts off with two languages (that is English and another language) because his parents do not speak a common language. Such a Nigerian child can even start off with three languages (the parents' languages and English). The chances are that such a child is likely to have competence in the use of two (or three) languages at an early age if one of those languages is not allowed to dominate. But often, the language that receives the greater reinforcement gains dominance with the result that the individual

thinks in the dominant language and translates into the subordinate language (Lyons 1981: 282).

For another group of Nigerians who are taught English at the time they are supposed to be acquiring the mother tongue, the chances are that if English is learnt in a mother tongue environment, it may become dominant but if it is learnt from parents and others who are not trained language teachers in a non mother tongue environment as for instance in Nigeria, the two language systems may fail to be 'integrated as one at some fairly, deep level of psychological organisation' (Lyons 1981: 282) but stored separately since the motivation for learning the two languages may be different and the situation of learning one of the languages is natural while the other is not. Learning the mother tongue is likely to be more thorough because the situations for which the language is used would be present and other users of the language present for interaction. There are also chances that some situations for which English words and expressions are used may be lacking. The result is that even with greater motivation to learn English first, the environment and method of learning will not facilitate proper learning nor will the mother tongue be properly learnt by the time the child starts primary school because of insufficient stimuli for consolidation. A situation which (for lack of a better term) we describe as imperfect bilingualism or linguistic malnourishment according to (Essien 1977: 80) is likely to result.

There is still another group of Nigerians who are born and brought up in the urban areas where their parents' language happens to be different from the language of the immediate community. The case of an Ibibio child who is born and brought up in any of the big urban centres as for instance Lagos, Enugu or Kaduna is pertinent here. It is likely that this Nigerian child will acquire Ibibio and also pick up the language of the immediate community (Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba) before learning English at school or (sometimes as early as the age of three) in the nursery school. He may even be taught English first by the parents rather than Ibibio or learn both (English and Ibibio) concurrently so as to enable him communicate with his neighbours and playmates who are neither Ibibio nor from the locality. In this case, he would have had three languages at his command by the age of six. It is to be understood that the case of the Ibibio child typifies the case of any Nigerian child who grows up outside his state or linguistic group. In Nigeria, the approximation to coordinate bilingualism is rare because often 'the (official) second language rather than the mother tongue is sociologically dominant' (Banjo 1996: 95).

It is also pertinent to include the group of Nigerians, who are referred to as the 'Afro Saxons', that is, Africans (in this case Nigerians) who though living in an African country where English is the second language learn to speak English before learning to speak an indigenous language if ever. For them English serves as a 'mother tongue' but their acquaintance with the language cannot be compared to that of an English child born to English parents and brought up in England. Davies (1991) has raised similar questions about the appropriateness of referring to language users like the 'Afro Saxons' as native speakers although Paikeday (1985) had earlier argued that a native speaker is not necessarily one who acquires a language from parents in a

mother tongue environment. Banjo (1996) has also observed that even Variety Three speakers of Nigerian English who can be regarded as 'typifying coordinate bilingualism' would hardly perform to an acceptable standard in their mother tongue in official and public domains and in the register of science and technology' nor would they perform well in all domains in English (P.96). This points to the fact that even the 'Afro Saxons' and Nigerian coordinate bilinguals lack the mother tongue competence in any language.

3. The Importance of the Mother Tongue

The mother tongue can be described as the language a person speaks first. It is often acquired (not learnt) from one's parents and is often the language spoken in the home and/or the immediate environment in which one grows up. Banjo (1996:64) describes a mother tongue speaker of a language as 'one who has been enveloped in the language from birth and is able to convey his most intimate feelings naturally in the language'. Questions were raised in previous section as to whether a mother tongue needs to be resident in the area where the language is spoken. Banjo (1996) is of the opinion that a mother tongue speaker of a language 'need not be resident exclusively in countries where the language is the mother tongue in the sociological sense but anywhere at all' (p.64) which appears to contradict his definition of a mother tongue speaker as 'one who has been enveloped in the language from birth? The mother tongue area appears to provide the setting which can be said to envelop an individual from birth where he finds natural and intimate situations that will enable him 'convey his most intimate thoughts naturally in the language'. It is perhaps possible to create a situation that is only close to this if the language is the language of the home.

The effect of the mother tongue on languages learnt later forms the basis of the Contrastive Analysis Principle of facilitation and interference and the learning theories of positive and negative transfer. Normally, a person learns a second, third or other languages in terms of the first kinds of structure and meanings already learnt in the mother tongue. The mother tongue therefore provides a foundation on which the teaching and learning of another language is based. Rabin (1958) has shown that whatever the method used in teaching a second language the learner associates words and sentences of the second language with those of his mother tongue. Other studies have shown that the effect of the mother tongue on languages learnt later is greater in the area of the sound system though interference also occurs in the area of grammar and semantics (Trubetsky 1939: 51-52, Weinrich, 1963: 14, Lado 1957:11).

Obemeata (1984) has shown that with proficiency in the mother tongue pupils perform better in a second language than those who are not proficient in their mother tongue before learning a second language. The study compared the performance of Yoruba children of the Ife six-Year Primary Project who were taught in their mother tongue (Yoruba) throughout primary school but learnt English as a school subject in six years of primary school with the performance of the control group which was taught in English in the last three years of primary education. Both groups also

studied Yoruba as one of the school subjects. The study statistically proved that in the school examinations and the external examination (First School Leaving Certificate Examination and National Common Entrance Examination), the pupils who were taught in Yoruba throughout the primary school but learnt English only as one of the school subjects had better results than those who were taught in English in the last three years of primary school. They had better results in English Language too. This study has been corroborated by others. Afolayan (1970) shows that the more accurate the knowledge of the mother tongue, the more efficient the capacity of analogy and translation and the more efficiently a learner learns a second language. Also, Tomori and Oledara (1975) demonstrated that even in adult learners, there is a positive influence on second language learning if the learner is literate in his mother tongue. Nor is this only a Nigerian affair. Micheal Barone reports the findings of Boston University Professors Christine Rossel and Keith Baker which analysed academic studies of students taught in their native language and concluded that the transitional bilingual period between primary and secondary when they are taught in English never helps children learn reading, writing and arithmetic (Barone 1998: 158).

Our discussion so far in this section points to one direction, that an individual should have one language – the first one he acquired as a mother tongue as the dominant language at his command. It is through this language that he learns another language by a process of analogy. As we shall see later, it is through this language that he thinks and expresses his thought. If as the behaviourists say 'thinking is internalised speech' or the process of the soul talking to itself as suggested by Plato, then one thinks using language. The question to ask here is, which of the languages at the command of a Nigerian child is he proficient enough in to be able to express his most intimate feeling naturally or think elaborately in? Most of them cannot boast of literacy, in their mother tongues. Even the 'Afro Saxons' cannot claim competence in English in all the domains for which language is used (formal and informal) to be able to express their thoughts naturally and elaborately in it.

4. Language, Learning and the Nigerian Child

Educational psychologists have noted that man's use of language has an overwhelming effect on the process of conditioning. This is mainly because man builds up complicated systems of classification through the use of language during his childhood (cf Stones 1966: 117). The quality of language possessed by a child transforms the way he adapts to his environments; that is the way he learns. Thus by extension, his understanding of the symbolic nature of language, he is able to understand classes of things and abstract concepts. The idea of colour for example is abstracted from a variety of things while complex relationships such as the ones expressed by deitic features like *today* and *tomorrow*; *before* and *after* are conceptualised through human use of language in a social setting. Since all these abstractions and 'the common currency of everyday life for the child... are contingent upon language and accessible only through language' argues Stones (1960:118), 'the

absolute primacy of adequate linguistic ability as an educational goal is clear'. In other words, one needs a good command of language before he can undertake advanced mental processes.

Researches which have emphasised the role of language in human learning ascribe this important role to language in human learning because it is the key to meaning. Piaget (1952) and Skinner (1962) have however shown that learning can take place as conditioning through Stimulus – Response – Reinforcement but this is not meaningful learning. It is only with language that many of the concepts involved even in dealing with concrete operations can be explained because between the response to a full comprehension there is a multitude of shades of meaning.

This leads to the symbolising and conceptualising function of language. Language enables man (unlike animals) to link the past with the present through his ability to verbally express the relations between things and the actions he performs so that he can carry this over to a new situation. This is what makes children different from animals who only transfer learned behaviour to new situations only through the mechanism of primary stimulus generalisation (cf Stones 1960:119). When for instance a child has learnt the idea of *right* and *wrong* he will be able to apply the idea in many situations other than the one in which the concept was established. Transfer of learning therefore takes place between stimuli (words) which are semantically similar not between those which are physically similar. A human child therefore carries over learned behaviour from one situation to another semantically related one. Thus, the response or a child's understanding of the word *teacher* for example is extended to *lecturer* and *doctor* to *physician*.

The Sapir – Whorf hypothesis which identifies language not only as the tool of thought but that which determines thought (cf Sapir 1949; Whorf 1949) adds another relevant dimension to generalisation and transfer. This hypothesis asserts that 'language is the shaper of ideas and that we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language' (Whorf 1956: 214). Although the principle that language determines thought (linguistic determinism) is regarded as an extreme view (cf Udofot 1998: 95-96), it stresses the importance of language in the way human beings perceive the world. The word *teacher* mentioned above has various connotations for many school children which will differ according to their experiences. A child will thus carry over into a new situation, through the medium of words, the convenient 'capsule of thought' which will describe real experience of things and situations to which they refer. 'If the child therefore lacks the experience which endows the word with this generalised significance, there will be little chance to transfer since the word has little meaning for the child' (Stones 1996:120).

Even higher than the initial mastery of the semantic properties of language is the logic of grammatical usage. Language is more than a random collection of words but a system with a logic and form which is imposed upon it by society. The ability to master the system of grammatical conventions makes it possible for the child to understand cause and effect relationships between phenomena and 'to manipulate symbolically logical systems such as may be found in mathematics and science'

(Stones 1966: 198). This system of rules represented in the mind of the speaker-hearer (grammar) is normally acquired in early childhood (Chomsky and Halle 1968: 6). The Russian psychologist, Luria, sees it (logical system of grammar) as that which enables the child 'to form concepts.... to draw conclusions from accepted assumptions, to master logical connections, to cognize laws for surpassing the boundaries of direct personal experience' (Luria 1959: 18). Such complexities expressed by thought and seen in syntactic elaborations are evident in expressions like '... if this... then that; because of this... that occurred; unless this... that will not occur' (cf Stones 1996: 124). These are highly abstract concepts dependent on language which only mastery of syntax can allow.

Learning that is not based on such logic as explained above is rote and inefficient learning. Such learning is very specific and not easily transferred to a new situation. The basis for this logical learning has been explained by Stones (1966: 199) thus:

While schemas involving motor activity may be developed without a linguistic basis, cognitive schemas depend upon concepts and the understanding of laws and logical connections which are formed through language. A child with a low level of linguistic ability will have poor conceptual ability and will be unable to understand the system of logical relationships which constitutes a cognitive schema.

The implication of Stones observations above is that a child who lacks understanding of logical connections between verbal statements will find it difficult to see the way various elements in a schema are related. This means that he will find it difficult to write logical paragraphs even though he knows what a paragraph is; he may fail to write correct sentences even though he can give a textbook definition of a sentence, he will find it difficult to apply knowledge he has learnt to a new situation even though he can recogitate all the facts when asked. In other words, he may be good in rote learning and recall but not in the higher domains of knowledge; those which require application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation (cf Bloom 1956:19).

The implications of our discussion in this section for the Nigerian child is easy to see. We have shown that an average Nigerian child is a bilingual or trilingual in early childhood and a quadrilingual or trilingual in later childhood. Our discussion so far also portrays that the Nigerian child who is bilingual or trilingual lacks the mastery of the mother tongue because hardly any Nigerian child learns one language as mother tongue in the first six years of life before starting formal education. Thus, he does not master the grammar and system of meaning in one language to enable him to learn a second language satisfactorily with possible facilitation, analogy and translation from the mother tongue. Obemeata (1984) reiterates Essien (1977) that 'most Nigerian children are victims of partial language deficiency or lack of proficiency in the English Language'. Nigerian pupils' lack of proficiency has been confirmed by numerous studies (cf Tomori 1967, Afolayan 1968, Davies 1967). Rather than facilitate their learning of English the mother tongues tend to interfere with their

learning of English. So many studies have documented this, as for instance, Afolayan (1968), Banjo (1974) and Udofot (1991) among others.

It therefore follows from our discussion above that the average Nigerian child including the 'Afro Saxon' does not have a language that he has mastered so well that 'he can express his most intimate feelings naturally' or can perform to an acceptable level in all domains (private and public). This deficiency is bound to affect his formation of concepts and the capacity for abstract and logical reasoning as well as the drawing of logical conclusions. The poor performance of Nigerian children in public examinations (e.g. WAEC and JAMB) particularly in English, Mathematics and the Sciences testify to the adverse effect of the deficiency in the language of education (English) and therefore in the capacity for abstract and logical reasoning as well as in the ability to learn the high cognitive skills: application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

5. Summary and Conclusion

This paper has attempted an examination of the National Policy of Education as regards Language in Nigeria and observed that this policy does not encourage the Nigerian child to have sufficient grounding in his mother tongue before learning English as a second language which because of its place in the Nigerian society and educational system enjoys a higher prestige differential. The lack of grounding in the mother tongue does not facilitate the learning of the second language and this in turn produces children who lack proficiency in the language of education. As a consequence, it has been shown that the performance of the Nigerian child in language learning and in the capacity for conceptualisation and logical reasoning is negatively affected leading to low academic performance. Perhaps the dilemma of the Nigerian child could be minimised if he were allowed to learn one language from birth to the time he starts primary school and this language rather than a second one is the language of instruction throughout primary school.

It could also help if the Nigerian child is taught English as a school subject by experts at school rather than by parents and nannies who are no experts. This will expose the child to the second language in the proper method. Every Nigerian child should be allowed to *naturally acquire* the language that is spoken in his home by his parents and other members of the family first so as to enable him to have a mastery of that language which will facilitate his learning of any other language and be his tool of thought.

The government should also intensify efforts in developing the indigenous languages and the training of teachers to teach them so that in a few years we may arrive at a point where a child's mother tongue is also the language of the immediate community and is developed enough for the purpose of teaching in the primary schools. Every Nigerian child should also be made to learn the language of the immediate community (his mother tongue) as a school subject in primary school so that this grounding in the mother tongue may facilitate his learning of a second and other languages. This language will therefore become the dominant languages in his

repertoire and serve both as the tool of thought and the foundation for learning the second and other languages.

It must be noted that learning is best done in the mother tongue but where, as in Nigeria, a second language is the language of education efforts should be made to minimise the disadvantage by giving the mother tongue sufficient attention. Much of the problem of poor performance in our schools today can to a large extent, be traceable to the fact that for the Nigerian child who did not have nursery education in a private or urban school, he is only exposed to English for three years before English becomes the language of instruction (according to the Language Policy). This period is grossly insufficient for mastery of the language for the child to think and express his thoughts in it.

REFERENCES

- Afolayan, A. (1968) *The Linguistic Problems of the Yoruba Learners and Users of English* Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of London.
- Afolayan, A. (1970). Teaching and Examining Yoruba, *West African Journal of Education* 14 (2), 141 – 144.
- Banjo, A. (1974). On the State of English Studies in Nigeria, *Journal of Nigerian English Studies Association* 1(1), 5-13.
- Banjo, A. (1996). *An Overview of the English Language in Nigeria*. Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press.
- Barone, M. 1998. When schools won't teach English. *Readers Digest* (Large edition) May 1998 issue: 152 – 159.
- Bloom, B. S. (Ed) 1956. *Taxonomy of educational objectives Bk.1 – Cognitive domain* New York: David McKay Co.
- Chomsky, N. and Halle, M. (1968). *The Sound Pattern of English*. New York, Harper and Row.
- Davies, A. (1991) *The Native Speaker in Applied Linguistics*. Edinburgh: University Press.
- Essien, O. (1977). The role of the English Language in our development. In:
- Essien, O. (1998). National Development, Language and Language Policy in Nigeria. A Paper Presented at the Sixteenth Annual Conference of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria (C LAN) Dec., 7th – 11th, 1988.

- Lado, R. (1957) *Linguistics Across Cultures*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Luria, A. R. (1959) *The Role of Speech in the Regulation of Normal and Abnormal Behaviour*. USSR: Pergamon
- Lyons, J (1981) *Language and Linguistics* Cambridge: University Press.
- Obemeata, J. (1984) The Mother Tongue in English Language Learning. *Journal of the Nigerian English Studies Association* 9 (1 & 2), 3-12.
- Paikeday, T. M. (1985) *The Native Speaker is dead!* Toronto and New York: Paikeday Publishing Inc.
- Piaget, J. (1952) *The Origins of intelligence in Children*. New York, University Press.
- Rabin, C. (1958) *The Linguistics of translation: Aspects of Translation Studies in Communication 2*. Communication Research Centre, University College, London.
- Stones, E. (1966) *An introduction to Educational Psychology*. London: Methuen.
- Skinner, B. F. (1962) *Cummulative Record* London: Methuen.
- Tomori, S.H.O. and Okedara, J. T. (1975) A comparative study of English as a Second Language by Literate and Illiterate Farmers of Oyo North District. *Journal of the Nigerian English Studies Association*, 17 (122), 89 – 101.
- Trubetskoy, N. S (1939) *Principles of Phonology*. California: University of California Press.
- Udofot, I. M. (1991) *A contrastive Analysis of English and Ibibio Phonological Systems*. Unpublished M. A. Dissertation. University of Uyo.
- Weinrich, U. (1963) *Languages in Contact: Findings and Problems*. The Hague Mouton and Co.