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## The English Language and Politics in Nigeria

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### Abstract

It is almost universally acclaimed that 'there is the closest of links between language dominance and economic, technological and cultural power' (Crystal, 2003:7). In this paper, the author examines the present role of English as a consequence of the National Language policy as contained in the *National Policy on Education* as well as the linguistic situation in the country vis-a-vis the politics of the government policy of the "big three" languages. She then makes projections about the future of English in Nigeria given the present situation of multilingualism and ethnicity as well as the challenges of the twenty-first century such as globalization and the need for a lingua franca.

**Key words:** The English language, Nigerian English, Nigerian languages,  
National language policy

### 1. Introduction

The language question has been a thorny and much discussed one in Nigeria. The fact that the language question has become a genuine political and linguistic problem can be seen from the attention it has received and the discussion it has generated in educational and linguistic circles. Language is used among humans to establish, adjust and maintain interpersonal relationships and convey ideas and notions that are believed to be in the overall interest of a group, institution or community (Austin 1962; Searle 1969; Stubbs, 1995). This, in effect, demonstrates that language is a form of action, which can generate counter actions and reactions in forms other than language. Fairclough (1989) also argues that ideologies are closely linked to power and language because language use is a demonstration of power. Language has often been used as a medium of domination and social force; it has often been used as a political tool hence it plays a significant role in human actions and reactions (Ayoola, 2007:71).

At the close of the twentieth century and in spite of its legislated position as the 'official language' in Nigeria, English metamorphosed from the official language of education, government and business to the unproclaimed lingua franca as well as the convenient language of both official and intimate 'record keeping' and communication (Udofot, 2003). And despite protests and legislations to the contrary, it is gradually being consciously and unconsciously groomed as the possible neutral language of unity in a multi-lingual setting like Nigeria which has been 'polarised along two linguistic lines - linguistic majority and linguistic minority' (Udofot, 2006).

In this paper, the present role of English as a consequence of the National Language policy as contained in the National Policy on Education as well as the linguistic situation in the country vis-a-vis the politics of the government policy of the “big three” languages are examined. Projections are made about the future of English in Nigeria given the present situation of multilingualism and ethnicity as well as the challenges of the twenty-first century such as globalization and the need for a lingua franca.

## 2. The ‘Big Three’ Language Policy and the Role of English

In Nigeria, the National Language Policy formulated in 1977 and revised in 1981, 1998 and 2004 assigns to English the role of serving as the language of instruction from the fourth year of a six-year primary course to the tertiary level. In addition, English is to be taught as a school subject right from the first year of primary education. The constitution has a clause which recognizes one of Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba (the languages of the larger ethnic groups in Nigeria) as an additional language of official proceedings in the federal legislature in addition to English as soon as the implementation is feasible (Banjo, 1996). To this effect, secondary school students are encouraged to learn one of these three Nigerian languages in addition to their mother tongues and English, if one of the three languages is not their mother tongue. Udofot (2000) examines in detail the implications of this imposed ‘bilingualism, trilingualism and quadrilingualism’ and the effect on the Nigerian child. Ker (2002:119) observes that:

A language policy that singles out only three languages for special attention is anything but fair and is therefore at variance with the tenet of ‘equal educational opportunities’ enshrined in the *National Policy on Education*. While a child, speaking a major language can comfortably handle two languages (e.g. Hausa and English) his own mother tongue and English, a child speaking a minority language will have to grapple with three: his own mother tongue, a major language and English (e.g. Etulo, Igbo and English)

These national policies, however, cannot be said to be fully in operation. In urban primary schools, for instance, instructions are given in English right from the first year of primary education while the switch to English in the fourth year of primary education hardly operates fully in the primary schools in the rural areas. Also, the learning of another Nigerian language in addition to the mother tongue hardly operates even in Federal Government schools because of the difficulties of having teachers; difficulties that may not be real.

Three main areas of the language problems and prospects in Nigeria have often been addressed: effects on education, development and national integration (See for instance Adeniran 1995, Essien 1998, Oyetade 1993). These studies have made various recommendations, one of which is a one language option for the purpose of national integration. The languages frequently recommended have been English, Hausa, Pidgin, Swahili and even a purposely “created” artificial language’ (Oyetade, 2003) called ‘Wazobia’. Others have recommended the multilingual approach which supports the elevation of one or more Nigerian languages to the status of national languages while Eka (2000) has recommended a progressive trilingual approach which involves ‘getting Nigerians to ultimately learn a Nigerian language first of their choice and later of popular (government and public) choice’ ( pp.5-6).

Nigeria has not had a comprehensive language policy as an organised attempt to find solutions to language problems in the country. What has emerged as a language policy came about in the context of other centrally defined national concerns such as the development of a national policy on education and the drafting of a constitution for the country. It is in connection with the *National Policy on Education* and the *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* that we can talk about language policy and planning in Nigeria (Oyetade, 2003).

The one language option would be the solution to Nigeria’s language problem if there is no opposition by the speakers of the minority languages. There is also the question of which language to choose. The multi-ethnic situation in Nigeria and the consequent emotional feeling of ethnic identity and fear of marginalization of the less populous ethnic groups have favoured the preference for English because of its neutrality, its colonial origin notwithstanding. It is internationally acclaimed that ‘there is the closest of links between language dominance and economic, technological and cultural power too’ (Crystal 2003:7). I therefore subscribe to Oyetade’s (2003: 107) assertion which notes that

... government pronouncements with regard to the status of the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) have awakened the language loyalty or ethnic loyalty of Nigeria’s minority language speakers. They have risen to resist what they regard as attempts to make them socially, economically and politically subservient to the speakers of the dominant languages.

It is on record that when the 1979 Constitution was to be revised, the recommendation that 'the three main languages - Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba should be adopted as national languages and taught in all primary and secondary schools in the country' (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1987, p.186) made speakers of the minority languages to stage a 'walkout' and this led to a watering down of the recommendation to 'Government shall promote the learning of indigenous languages' (Section 19 [4]). Up till now, the constitutional provision of the three major languages in the national Assembly has not been implemented which could be due to a lack of will to implement the provision... thus non-implementation is a way to certify their opposition (Oyetade 2003:108).

Besides, Nigerians recognise the status of English as an international language used widely for computer programming and the internet as the neutral lingua franca for wider communication within the country. Strong positions on this have been made by Jibril, (1990) and Ker (2002). Thus, although English is in theory and practice the official language in Nigeria used in education, government, business, the mass media and literature, it is (unofficially) the language of letter writing and spoken communication among friends and even members of the same family when they find it convenient as many Nigerians cannot write their mother tongues while many of them in recent years, the 'Afro Saxons', (cf. Mazrui 1975) speak English as their first language and can hardly speak their parents' mother tongues.

It is for these reasons that Banjo (1996) describes English in Nigeria as the language of 'record keeping' because it is used in government offices, private organisations and international transactions for keeping records of transactions and proceedings that were spoken sometimes in an indigenous language in the form of minutes (pp.68-70). A recent research into the language of the open market in Uyo, the Akwa Ibom State Capital, a state where Ibibio is understood by every citizen in spite of his dialectal group revealed that 76.7% of the respondents preferred to use English for business transactions because, according to them, the use of English is better for their business (Ademulaju 1998:28-29)<sup>1</sup>. This research also revealed that 'there is hardly anybody in the open market that cannot speak English in whatever form (p.33). The Nigerian-based Pidgin is, however, not a very popular language of communication in Akwa Ibom State.

The above discussion shows that English has enjoyed a pride of place in the Nigerian society. The *National Policy on Education* has cultivated this prominence by recommending its being taught right from the first year of primary education. Literacy

in English and/or oracy in it guarantee acceptance and success anywhere in the country. The result is that even the old woman in the remotest village in Nigeria who has never been to school can boast of a few English words and sentences. An illiterate neighbour of mine whose grandchildren made so much noise because of a continuous chattering in English once screamed:

*Yak nkop nkpo mmuyom iko mbakara ndi!fo ami*  
– Nonsense'

(Let me hear with your noisy chatter in English – Nonsense!).

What then is the future of English in Nigeria, given the present situation when even the older generation who are apparently resenting the pervasive use of English by the younger generation cannot finish a sentence without a word of English?

### **3. The Lingua Franca Question and the Future of English in Nigeria**

With the increased level of literacy in Nigeria and the increasing number of English users in the Nigerian society it is anticipated that by the middle of the twenty-first century, Nigerian English may have two main varieties: the Standard variety used by the educated Nigerians for communication within and outside official circles and many non-standard varieties. The non-standard varieties will likely reflect the language of the community where they flourish. The bulk of them would be intelligible to people who share the same language with the speaker and partly to other Nigerians who may not understand the code-mixed words from the Nigerian language. This brand of Nigerian English (NNE) will be slightly different from the present geographical varieties of Nigerian English for instance Esen's (1961) 'Efiglish' and Nwafor's (1971) English-Igbo, English-Hausa 'Engliyoruba' in the sense that the present geographical variations are largely attempts to render the Standard variety with mother tongue interferences on mainly the accent. The non-standard Nigerian English of the 21st century will not be Standard English but hybrids of English words and words from Nigerian vernaculars. They will constitute dialects rather than accents of Nigerian English which in time are likely to creolise.

The standard variety, on the other hand, may become more Nigerianised. Having been taught in the school system, it will be the brand used for official purposes by all Nigerians who learn English in Nigeria. It must be noted that in spite of reactions to the contrary, Nigerian English is the brand being taught and used in secondary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria because, for some decades now, English teaching in most parts of the country has been done by Nigerians who were taught by other Nigerian teachers themselves.

Most teachers who were taught by expatriates (mother tongue speakers of English) are now dead or retired. The point being made here is that the Nigerian (nativised variety) is now being taught in schools and used by products of the school system and, following observable trends in language change, is likely to be sufficiently different from Standard British English to deserve the name ‘Ninglish’. Nigerian English, if accepted as such, and consciously cultivated, as Nigerian writers have done in literature, can provide a background and an identity for its speakers which alien English never could. Perhaps giving it the name ‘Ninglish’ would make it Nigerian like the North German variety of English – ‘Minglish’ coined from the name of the North German language *Missingch* + English’ (Martens, 1990, pp.261:269).

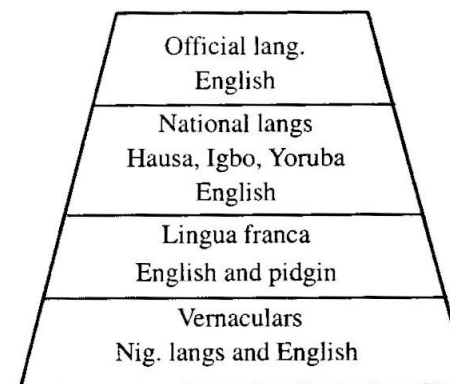
Nigerians themselves, including those who clamour for an indigenous language as Nigeria’s lingua franca, help to perpetuate English. Educated Nigerian parents who know that English is a second language in Nigeria and should not replace the mother tongue which they would not want to exchange for Hausa, Yoruba or Igbo - the national languages - teach their children English as a first language. The question now is: if in the face of government policies and attempts to develop and encourage the use of the Nigerian languages (at least in the first six years of life before the learning of the second language) Nigerian babies are made to acquire English as their first language (apparently to help them do well in school and be able to communicate outside the home), is English therefore easy to replace in Nigeria in the foreseeable future?

It is easy to explain this ‘prestige-laden attitudinal differential in favour of English’, (Ogene 1996:21). English is not just the other language available to Nigerian bilinguals but one which guarantees social advance besides being the tool of wider communication outside ones immediate community. Besides, Nigerians recognise the status of English as an international language used widely for computer programming and the internet. It is therefore dominant over the mother tongues of most Nigerians and, as we have seen earlier, it serves as the first language for many Nigerians born in the second half of the twentieth century. This dominance of English over the mother tongues of most Nigerians is such that by the twenty-first century, linguistic interference, which is now often noted in connection with Nigerian languages and English, may be examined in relation to English and Nigerian languages to the extent that English-based creoles which may replace Nigerian languages are likely to emerge by the middle of the twenty-first century (cf. Essien 1998). Although Essien (1998) sees English-based creoles as Nigerian languages, not English, since English merely provides the lexical items and

not the structure, they will have sufficiently deviated from the Nigerian languages to deserve other names.

#### 4. Endangerment of Indigenous Languages

The above situation points to endangerment of Nigerian languages. Given the present situation in Nigeria where two Nigerians (husband and wife) who share a common linguistic background teach their children English as a first language and communicate with each other in their mother tongue but with the child in English, not to mention a situation where two Nigerians from different linguistic backgrounds marry and use English for communication with each other and with the children, the future of English in Nigeria is assured in spite of government policies and nationalistic feelings. This means that in the next decade or two, hardly any Nigerian family may use the Nigerian languages even for unofficial purposes. And in the next fifty years when those who speak Nigerian languages must have died out there may be no mother tongue speakers of many Nigerian Languages. A language hierarchy for Nigeria at the moment looks something like the illustration below:



*Fig.1 A Language Hierarchy for Nigeria*

This process by which English colonises the other lower layers of the language hierarchy in Nigeria means that English is likely to take over some of the functions currently served by other languages with the Nigerian languages not performing any or meaningful roles and, therefore, falling into oblivion. A frightening trend of the English language usage in Nigeria is, therefore, the endangerment of Nigerian languages and the possible extinction of some of them by the close of the twenty-first century. This situation has been noted as a global trend in Graddol (2000:13) who observes that

English is also steadily “colonizing” other languages in the world to the extent that a majority of the world’s languages are likely to become extinct.

### 5. Summary and Conclusion

An attempt has been made in this paper to describe the place English has assumed in Nigeria. Its future has also been projected. Clearly, English has metamorphosed from the official language of education, business and commerce to the unproclaimed lingua franca (used for inter-ethnic communication) in Nigeria as well as the convenient language of unofficial and intimate ‘record keeping’ and communication. It is gradually and unconsciously being groomed by both the education system and Nigerians themselves as a possible language of unity in both multi-cultural marriages and a multilingual country.

The next national policy on language could go a step further and recognise what has been going on illegally by making English Nigeria’s lingua franca for national integration, while encouraging the development of the indigenous languages rather than expect Nigerians to learn any or all the big three languages as this does not seem to go down well with speakers of the minority languages. If every state had its own language which is also taught in schools and used for the mass media, at least a good number of Nigeria’s hundreds of languages will be developed (Udofot 2007).

Scholars in the field of English studies in Nigeria should also intensify efforts in the codification of aspects of Nigerian English and produce standard textbooks for use in schools as Nigerian writers (novelists and playwrights) have done to provide reference materials for teaching and examinations. This will also help to standardise certain features and usages across the country. The Standard Nigerian English or ‘Ninglish’ would then be used as the official language and the lingua franca while the diatypic varieties which would have emerged are likely to replace the local languages which would be used for informal and unofficial transactions and as the language of family and friendly interactions. This is an unfortunate situation indeed but that appears to be the handwriting on the wall. The challenge for the twenty-first century is not to allow this development to happen by chance but to be directed and controlled by an appropriate language policy along the lines suggested above.

### Note

Ademulaji (1998:28-29). This was a final year project that I supervised in the 1997/98 session.

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