E-ISSN: 1116 - 2619 P-ISSN: 3026-8524
MPRI-JHLAR | INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES, LITERATURE AND ART RESEARCH
VOL. 08 NO. 6 – APRIL, 2025

LANGUAGE INEQUALITY: AN EXPLORATION INTO NIGERIA'S LANGUAGE POLICIES

ODEKUNBI, SUNDAY K. Ph.D
Department of English, School of Languages, Oyo State College of Education, Lanlate

DOI: https://doi.org/10.70382/mejhlar.v8i6.037

Abstract

Language inequality, the belief that languages are not of equal status, has been scantily considered in the existing literature. It is not thoroughly treated because it is mostly considered as a minute part of a larger topic. It is therefore examined in this study with the purpose of situating it in the language policy statements in the country's constitution and National Policy on Education. Nigeria as a multilingual nation was considered before embarking on the examination of two policy statements in each of these documents. It was established that language inequality pervades the policy statements in the two documents. It was demonstrated that while Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are presented as being superior to all other indigenous languages in the country, English, an inherited but official language is shown to be more important than all the Nigerian indigenous languages. The paper therefore concludes that languages can only be said to be equal theoretically since they are all used for communication purpose, but assignment of different functions to and people's attitudes towards languages [redacted] practically demonstrate that some languages are more equal than the others. It is finally recommended, among others, that parents should encourage their children and wards to use their indigenous languages to prevent them from going into extinction.

Keywords:
Language inequality, Nigeria's Constitution, National Policy on Education, language function, language attitude

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Prof. S. T. Addo [GHANA]

Introduction

It is the belief of some linguists that all languages are equal. They claim that no language is superior to the other, as long as they are all used for communication purpose. According to Bamgbose (2004), the argument is anchored on three reasons. One, all languages have structures and the potential to express all the concepts the users may want to express. Two, the belief is used to rubbish the racist attitude that some languages are primitive. Three, language equality is used to protect some languages, particularly the minority ones, from being discriminated against. Contrary to this belief is another that upholds language inequality (Mackey, 1984: Bamgbose, 2004). The apostles of this opinion claim that if all languages are equal, what is the justification for the assignment of different functions to different languages, especially in multilingual countries, and what is the reason for positive attitude towards some languages at the expense of others. For instance, in some African countries formerly colonized by the British, English is assigned larger and obviously more important functions than the indigenous languages and people's attitude towards English is extremely positive while their attitude to their indigenous languages are negative. This is the reason Mackey (1984) contends that while claiming language equality, since there is no sovereign state without minority languages, languages cannot be of equal educational value. He therefore submits that "all languages are equal only before God and the linguists". This study is thus set to do a critique of four of Nigeria's language policies in the constitution and National Policy on Education with a view to establishing inequality of languages in Nigerian context. It is believed that the paper will add to the existing knowledge on sociolinguistics and will be useful to those working on Nigeria's language policies and language attitudes. Policy makers in Nigeria may also find it useful in re-assessing the functions assigned to the English and indigenous languages in Nigeria. In the next section, Nigeria as a multilingual nation is considered.

Nigeria as a Multilingual Country

Multilingualism simply means a situation in which a country or nation has many languages. Ogunsiji (2001) defines it as a phenomenon of linguistic pluralism within a single polity. He also submits that it involves the use of more than one language in a nation. Aremu's (2020) claim is that multilingualism is the art of

employing more than two languages in a given speech community. He goes further that multilingualism is often caused by conglomeration of people of different cultural, linguistic and social backgrounds into a nation. Nigeria is, for instance, a multilingual nation, considering the number of languages it has. Most scholars claim that it has over 400 languages. Adegbite (2003) submits that it has 400 languages while Akinjobi (2004) contends that it has 470 indigenous languages apart from English. Ogunsiji (2004) contends that since the country has over 400 ethnic groups with each having its own language, the country will then have over 400 indigenous languages. He however concludes that the only three politically recognised ones are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba languages. Soyele (2019) also upholding the belief that the country has over 400 indigenous languages, argues that the languages had been in use before the implantation of English, the language of colonialism. These indigenous languages, according to Bamgbose (1995), are divided into three namely, the deprived languages, the major-minority indigenous languages and the minor-minority indigenous languages. The deprived languages are the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba languages that are used in formal education and as a means of communication beyond their immediate communities. The major minority and minor-minority languages, as claimed by Bamgbose, are the endangered languages which are not used for formal education but are limited to the in-groups and for purposes like rituals, festivals and informal contacts. In addition to the indigenous languages are the English language, Arabic and Pidgin. Ogunwale (2013) argues that Nigeria has around 396 minor-minority languages and 12 major-minority languages among which are Kanuri, Nupe and Edo. He finally submits that each of them has a population of between 800 thousand and 8 million speakers.

Nigeria's Language Policies in NPE

As observed by Adegbite (2004), Nigeria does not have any language policy document anywhere but only has 'scanty and sporadic language provisions' embedded in the *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* and *National Policy on Education* (NPE, 1977). The critique here will be done starting with the first language statement which is in section 1: sub section 8, page 9 sub-titled: 'The importance of Language' which reads thus:

> In addition to appreciating the importance of language in educational process, and a means of preserving the people's culture, the Government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother tongue. In this connection, the Government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

As indicated above, the policy statement is enshrined in the 1977 NPE. Though it is claimed to have been reviewed later, it has been observed that nothing, except the date, changes in the statement since then. This is however not our focus here. The focus here is to establish the fact of language inequality in Nigeria exploring into the policy statements. To start with, the policy reinforces the fact that language and culture are inseparable; as language is a part of culture, it is also the means through which culture is expressed and preserved. It then states that *in the interest of national unity* (the emphasis is mine), each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own. And the three languages are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Right from the beginning, Government has made it obvious that even the Nigerian indigenous languages are not equal. The languages have been divided into two groups: the major and the minor. The three considered to be equal are classified as major languages while around 400 remaining ones are seen as minor.

If languages are truly equal, why encouraging the pupils to learn any of the three languages only? Why does the government consider them major? Though it is not clearly stated in the statement that other languages are minor, it is deducible. Thus, rather than for the policy to help in achieving national unity, it caused disaffection in the so-called minority language users who, in the words of Adegbite (2004), justifiably expressed their feelings against marginalization by the dominant ethnic groups whose languages are recognised. The resultant effect is that, the policy was practised for only few years and it crumbled like a pack of cards. This confirms the argument of Coulmas (1992) that regardless of the indices used, indigenous languages cannot be rated equally. He then submits that it will be "a delusion to assume that mother-tongue languages are of equal value, and that value differences become apparent on the foreign language market only…"

Another statement that is germane to this study is in section 3 sub-section 15:4, page 13 which says:

> Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the Primary School is initially the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community and, at a later stage, English.

Language inequality also transparently pervades the statement. To start with, it is clear that the attitude of the people towards the use of the mother-tongue or the language of immediate community of the pupils as the medium of instruction, even at the primary school level, is not encouraging because they believe it is not as important as the English, thus there is need for "the government to see to it that" it is used. Two, with all the encouragement, it will be used only at the initial stage of primary education. This clearly shows that the English language, a foreign language, a language of colonization, spoken by only a negligible percentage of people in Nigeria, is seen to be more important than the mother-tongue or the language of immediate community of the pupils. They will start with the languages believed to be less important and less valuable, languages thought to have little or no importance on their future, and then switch to English, believed to largely determine their future; the language they will continue to use till the end of their education. Even when it has been established long before the policy statement was made that the mother tongue is the best medium for the education of the child (Oyetade, 2001), the government, believing that English is more important than the indigenous languages, states that it should *only* be used at the early stage of the child's primary education. Ayandele (1979) contends that the statement is a mark of linguistic imperialism because it was patterned after many statements expressed by the colonial officials that African indigenous languages were inadequate for education beyond the first two or three years of primary school.

Language Policies in the Constitution

There are also two language statements in the Nigerian constitution which clearly indicate the belief of our leaders and law makers in the superiority of some languages than the other. The first statement is in Chapter 5, Section 55 page A 908. It states that:

> The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, and Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made thereof.

It is clear from the statement that the business of the National Assembly is expected to be conducted *only* in the English language. One, considering the order of the languages that are mentioned, English comes first. Two, a comma is used to clearly separate English from the three other indigenous languages mentioned, to show that it is more important than or superior to them. Three, these indigenous languages can only be used after satisfying the condition given—adequate arrangements are made, a condition that is not attached to the use of English, an inherited language. As a matter of fact, scholars have argued that the arrangements can never be made (Akindele & Adegbite, 1999; Jolayemi, 2004). The argument of these people is that it is not clear how the arrangements will be made. Jolayemi raises some questions: i. Will the National Assembly use Hausa in the morning, Igbo in the afternoon and Yoruba in the evening and or English outside the Assembly Hall? ii. Will they use Hausa for matters on economy, Igbo for matters on security and education and Yoruba for matters on social development and English for matters on sports and iii. Will the languages be used monthly, that is Hausa throughout January, Igbo in February, Yoruba in March and English in April, etc.?

Another important question raised is that with the *adequate arrangements*, are all the members of the National Assembly expected to be able to speak all the major languages even when they are not from the same region? This is an indirect way of affirming the superiority of English to the indigenous languages. The law-makers believe, because the Nigerian indigenous languages are not as important as the English language, they are therefore not fit for the discussion of national issues. That is why a condition that is difficult to meet is attached to the statement. Also, as argued before, it is stated in the statement that the arrangements can only be made to consider the use of only three of the over four hundred indigenous languages in the country. The other ones are seen as not fit for consideration even when the members of the National Assembly themselves are elected to the Assembly by the ethnic tribes which use the languages. In summary, the constitution makers believe English is superior to Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, and

these three languages are also more important than the other indigenous languages in the country.

The second statement to be considered here is in Chapter V, Section 97, page A.928 of the Nigeria's constitution which states that:

> The business of the House of Assembly shall be conducted in English, but the House may in addition to English, conduct the business of the House in one or more other languages spoken in the state as the House may by resolution approve.

A critical consideration of the policy statement above also reveals language inequality. It expressly states that the business of the House of Assembly shall be conducted in English. One, from its context of use here, *shall* expresses certainty and compulsion, and not probability. Two, to separate the use of English from what is said after it, it is followed by a comma. Three, for obvious reasons, one will be justified to contend that the addition of the use of one or more other languages spoken in the state is done only to fulfill all righteousness. Firstly, it is stated that the House *may* (if possible) only use one or other languages in addition to English, meaning that it is not compulsory, simply because it was the opinion of the constitution makers that the indigenous languages spoken in the state are inferior to English. Secondly, there will be need for deliberation in the House before their usage, which is not required in the use of English.

Also, as argued in the previous constitutional statement, what will be the modality for the selection of the language or languages to be used, especially if the state is multilingual? For instance, it has been observed that Plateau and Cross River States have 62 and 67 languages respectively (Adegbija, 1994). The point being made indirectly by the constitution makers is that *only English* (the emphasis is mine) should be used for the conduct of the business of the House of Assembly because it is superior to other languages in the state. In the next section, the adduced reasons for the superiority of English and the three big Nigerian languages are briefly considered. We start from the English language.

English Superiority

Three factors, apart from the legal status are given by Bamgbose (2004) for the dominance of English in Nigeria. The factors are: number of users, socio-economic

status of speakers and domains of use. He however stresses that the factors are not of equal importance. For instance, in Nigeria where English, a colonial language, is retained as our official language, it is spoken by only 20 percent of the population (Jowitt, 1995). Indigenous languages like Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba have greater percentage of speakers, but English is dominant because of the higher socio-economic status of its speakers. It dominates the political and national life of the country. In fact, this factor now contributes to the growth of English in Nigeria because everybody now craves for its learning believing that it is the route to socio-economic relevance and advancement in the country.

Another factor that is germane here is the domain of use. In most of the African countries colonized by the British, the prominent role of English is maintained. Thus, English continues to take the lead in the domains of education, law, administration, politics, communication, science and technology as well as literature. All efforts made to extend the domains of use of the indigenous languages and reduce those of English have failed because of poor or non-implementation of policies. Even when it is stated in some language policies that the major indigenous languages will be used for certain national purposes, they are either poorly implemented or not implemented at all. That English is now a world language has also boosted its power and status not only in Nigeria but in the world at large. It is now seen as "the world's lingual franca" (Conrad, 1996 in Bamgbose, 2004) and "the language of the future" (Bamgbose, 2004).

Superiority of Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo

The principal reason for the dominance of these three indigenous languages is the legal status given to them in some government documents, particularly in the constitution and National Policy on Education. Any language that is given a legal status is obviously made to be superior to others. Adegbite (2004) argues that the Nigerian government was of the belief that it was wrong for English to remain the only Nigerian official language, thus, like some developed countries of the world such as Japan and China that use indigenous languages internally and engage English for international communication, incorporated the three major Nigerian languages into the constitution and some other documents. Some other scholars like Jolayemi (2004) also believe that this was done with the thought that with time, one of them might emerge as a replacement for the English, a foreign

language. Unfortunately, the intention could not be pushed to the end when it was realised that it could engender chaos and anarchy.

Also, as argued before, apart from the fact that the users of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba which constitute the "big three" are largely confined to the three major parts of the country namely western, northern and eastern parts, the populations of the speakers of these three languages are larger than the speakers of the other Nigerian indigenous languages. As submitted by Jowitt (1995), each of the languages has not less than ten million while the users of other indigenous languages have one million or less. Development is another factor. It plays a significant role in the selection and promotion of a language. Jowitt stresses that development involves standardization of orthography, modernization of the numeration system, creation of metalanguage, production of materials and the use of the language in radio and television broadcasting and in creative writing, among others. In the language of Jowitt, the big three show the highest degree of development while more than half of other indigenous languages are yet to be committed to writing.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The issue of language inequality has been considered within the ambit of the Nigeria's language policy statements in the National Policy on Education and Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It has been established that in spite of the argument of some scholars that languages are equal based on the belief that all languages have structures and their ability to express any concept or object that speakers may encounter, as far as the statements considered are concerned, language equality can only be theoretically advanced. Practically, languages are not equal. This necessitates not only the assignment of different roles and functions to both English and indigenous languages in the two policy documents considered, but also influences the attitudes of the policy makers to the languages.

In spite of evident demonstration that languages are not equal, our position is that the indigenous and endangered languages should not be left to go completely into extinction. The following recommendations are therefore suggested. One, the government and the Nigerian linguists should do all they can to enhance their development and assignment of higher role to them in education. As contended

by Adegbite (2004), this will attract greater benefits to Nigeria as a nation. Two, parents should encourage their children and wards to speak their indigenous languages at home. They should desist from promoting English, a foreign language, to the peril of their indigenous languages. Exaltation of English will not only facilitate the death of the indigenous languages, but can also alienate their children from their culture because languages carry and promote the users' cultures. Three, the curriculum planners should not just specialize in formulating policies, but should see to their implementation. Four, as argued earlier, promotion of only few indigenous languages over others portends doom for the country. Efforts should therefore be made to give adequate recognition to the so-called minor languages. Finally students can be encouraged to study the indigenous languages in tertiary institutions by giving them scholarship, and the indigenous language teachers can be given special salary.

References

Adegbija, E. 1994. The context of language planning in Africa: an illustration with Nigeria. Martin P. (ed.) Language Contact and Language Conflict. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 139-163.

Adegbite, W. 2003. Multilingualism and national development. Oyeleye, L & Olateju, M. (Eds.) *Readings in Language and Literature*. Ife: OAU Press. 153-168

Adegbite, W. 2004. Bilingualism-biculturalism and the utilization of African languages for the development of African nations.Oyeleye, L. (ed.) *Language and Discourse in Society*. Ibadan: Hope Publications 13-31

Akinjobi, A. 2004. Language chauvinism and the prospect of an indigenous national language in Nigeria. Oyeleye, L. (ed.) *Language and Discourse in Society*. Ibadan: Hope Publications. 32-46.

Aremu, M. 2020. English hegemony and national development: The Nigerian experience. Oladipupo R., Akindele, J. & Osisanwo, A. (eds.) *Phonetics, Phonology and Sociolinguistics in the Nigerian Context: A Festschrift for Adenike Akinjobi*. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers. 305-316.

Bamgbose, A. 1995. English in the Nigerian environment. Bamgbose, A., Banjo, A. & Thomas, A. (eds.) *New Englishes: A West African Perspective*. Ibadan: Mosunro. 9-26.

…… 2004. English and inequality: an African perspective. Awonusi, S. & Babalola, E. (eds.) *The domestication of English in Nigeria*. Lagos: University of Lagos Press 1-14.

Coulmas, F. 1992. *Language and Economy*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Jolayemi, D. 2004. A Nigerian lingual franca and its politics. Oyeleye, L. (ed.) *Language and Discourse in Society*. Ibadan: Hope Publication. 62-72.

Mackey, W. 1984.Mother-tongue education: Problems and prospects. Prospects 14(1), 37-50.

Ogunsiji, 2001. Utilitarian dimension of language in Nigeria. Igboanusi, H. (ed.) *Language Attitude and Language Conflict in West Africa*. Ibadan: Enicrownfit Publishers. 152-164

Ogunsiji, A. 2004. Status, features and functions of English in Nigeria and their implications for EL2 teaching/learning. Oyeleye, L. (ed.) *Language and Discourse in Society*. Ibadan: Hope Publications. 83-97

Ogunwale, J. 2013. Harnessing the multilingual factors of Nigeria for development: The challenges and strategies. Adegbite, W., Ogunsiji, A. & Taiwo, O. (eds.) *Linguistics and the Glocalisation of African Languages for Sustainable Development: A Festschrift in Honour of Prof. Kola Owolabi*. Ibadan: Universal Okada Books Limited.115-127

Oyetade, S. 2001. Attitude to foreign languages and indigenous language use in Nigeria. Igboanusi, H. (ed.) *Language Attitude and Language Conflict in West Africa*. Ibadan: Enicrownfit Publishers. 14-29.

Soyele, R. 2019. Language attitudes in Nigeria: A sociolinguistic x-ray. Bello, O. & Hunjo, H. (eds.) *Sociolinguistics, (Critical) Discourse, Pragmatics & Nigerian English A Festschrift in Honour of Dele Samuel Adeyanju*. Lagos: Digitech Creative Press House. 113-120.

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Prof. S. T. Addo [GHANA]