

Nigeria's Multilingual Setting and Critical Evaluation of the National Language Policy: Prognosis of the Future of Nigerian Languages

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Introduction

Language tradition has not gone beyond being transmitted from one generation to another. The nature of transmission can either be biological or cultural. It is natural that human beings can be genetically programmed to acquire a particular language or dialect totally different from that of their mothers, family, or community. Being the most valuable possession of man, language is the overall enormous highly recognized over other species. With regard to language, there are a lot of the classic contributions contributed by some renowned linguists on language as a concept. Sapir (1921) describes the term "...a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols". Also, Bloch and Trager (1942) view language as "... a system of arbitrary symbols by means of which a social group cooperates." It is also seen as a conventional system of signal used for communication by a community and or any other language group. This describes that that system of signal refers to phonemes that are combined to produce segmental and super segmental sounds that culminate into utterances carrying meaning as a message being the vital aim of a language (Gimson, 1980). But Hall (1968) sees language as "the instinctive where by humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols." Brook (1971) submits that language remains "...a learned systematic symbolic vocal, culturally acquired and exclusive mark of a man". Words like communication, interaction, and oral auditory are very important and relevant to the work at hand. The linguists are primarily concerned with natural languages, that is exactly why the question "what is language?" carries with it the presupposition that each of the several thousand recognizably distinct natural languages spoken throughout the world is a specific instance of something general (Lyons, J. 1981).

Nigeria's Multilingual Setting

It is very much vital to know what is meant by the word "multilingualism" having been appeared a key word to this issue. Elue, M. (1981) asserts that multilingualism is seen as "...phenomenon that results from a situation where people belonging to a particular society speak different languages." It is a situation where by different languages are spoken by the people situated in the same environment. Another description remains a linguistic behavior of the members of a group community which alternately uses more than two languages depending on the situation and function (Kachru, 1986). In this regard, there exist many small speech communities having different languages with which they communicate and interact among themselves. Some factors have been observed being the causative agents of multilingualism in our societies include colonialism, imperialism, migration, and their equivalents (Cenoz and Gorter, 2011).

The overall advantage man has over other species is language - the basic and valuable possession. It is with language that man has the capability to deal with changes in his community. It is with what one can organize his society and faces other emergencies in life, this is because language defines man's humanity and enables individual in survival. Indeed, groups of people are without any point of doubt identified by their languages. The language or speech group of such people is referred to either homogenous or heterogeneous. The homogenous societies simply mean the mono-ethnic dwellers of a particular environ sharing just one common language. Such individuals do have no any single problem in communicating and interacting with other members of their societies.

All what is expected there is unity and progress. In Nigeria, nowadays, is very difficult to find such settlements as existed before. When talking about heterogeneous as the name implies, it has to do with diversity of languages. Of course, those are the societies full of diverse problems and peculiarities. The examples of heterogeneous societies in Africa include: Nigeria, Ghana, Dahomey and some other countries. However, it is such heterogeneity that results to the present multilingualism in Nigerian societies as it thrives in many countries of the world.

Of the factors responsible for multilingualism, include mountains, forest swamp lands, desert, rivers, economic, conquest, and colonization. Through the natural phenomenon the Niger/Benue 'Y' shaped rivers, back to Nigerian history, directly shows from the earliest times that Nigeria is divided into three major areas i.e. North, West and East, corresponding with the three major language groups of Nigeria which include Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba from North, South and East respectively. Beyond these three major language groups, there also exist at least more than four hundred indigenous groups as estimated, of course all speaking different languages in Nigeria. The prominent among them are only nine into which translation will be needed when it comes to some national issues on language. These are Edo, Efik, Ijaw, Fulfulde, Igbo, Tiv, Kanuri, Yoruba, and Hausa. We also have some dialects within, and almost each and every ethnic group with different understanding in their languages, that is, not naturally intelligible to each other. Therefore, speakers of those dialects do not some time understand themselves though belonging to one linguistic group. In the Yoruba ethnic group for example, an Akoko Yoruba speaker understands the Ibadan Yoruba speaker, but the Akoko Yoruba speaker is not understood by the Ibadan Yoruba speaker. Also Gombe Fulfulde speakers are understood by Adamawa Fulfulde speakers but the Gombe Fulfulde speakers cannot get what Adamawa Fulfulde speakers speakeven if they happen to be in the same area. In Bendel state as another instance, the multicity of language is so obvious that the languages of people living in some kilometers are unintelligible to one another. The situation is that, they belong to a common but non-indigenous contact language for intelligible communication.

Critical Evaluation and Prognosis

With this complex language situation, Nigeria faces multi-ethnic groupings with very perplexing linguistic problems. Therefore, to critically evaluate the national language policy, one has to refer to the national policy on Education (NPE) introduced after the embarkation of the National Curriculum Conference (NCC) held in the year 1977. For the first time, the federal government of Nigeria brought out in pamphlet form a comprehensive policy statement on the role and function of all levels of education. This policy statement was revised in 1981. The NPE (1981 revised) defines primary education as an institution for children aged normally between 6 and 11 above. The document rightly observed that since the rest of the education system is built upon it, the primary stage is the key to the success or failure of the whole education system. It is under this assumption that it is intended to examine some of the problems that may be affecting this important education of primary stage. One of the objectives of primary education in Nigeria is the inculcation of permanent literacy and ability to communicate effectively in English language.

Above emphasizes that language plays a very vital role in the process of both formal and informal education. A national language is always referred to the language which functions as the main language of a particular nation (Trudgill, 2003). That means language is more than an instrument for the conveyance of ideas. It is an instrument for working upon the feelings of others and for self-expression. Thus, the language of education affects the possibilities and opportunities of acquiring knowledge. In the UPE (1981 revised) section 3, 15(4) it is claimed that "Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary schools is initially the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community, and at a later stage, English." Primary one to three will be taught in their mother tongue or the language of the immediate community where the child heals. Later, or when he reaches primary four to six is expected to be taught in English language.

Admittedly, the language of education significantly affects understanding of a learning task, so a serious re-examination of our use of English as medium of instruction in our senior primary schools is necessary. It is also re-stated in the revised copy (2004) of the NPE the medium of instruction in the primary schools shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. From the fourth year English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment, and French shall be taught as subject (NPE 4th edition, 2004). Unfortunately, some institutions start as from primary one to use English language in their schools and even punish a child who uses his mother tongue for self-expression at such level.

The use of vernacular as a medium of instruction in the first three years of primary school is hereby strongly recommended. English may continue to be one of the languages offered as a course in primary schools. The same policy does not nowadays exist in the secondary schools where another two languages are expected to be acquired beside the mother tongue.

To prognosticate the future of Nigerian languages however, there is need to consider the multilingual situation of the nation. Of course, the multilingualism must long live and remain in Nigeria without adequate national solution. What actually to do by Nigerians is to become multilingual although that cannot be the solution too and cannot also wash away the multilingualism in our societies. If for example the Nigerians acquire the nine languages i.e. the prominent languages, still will not guarantee a complete national language solution and ensure effective interaction and communication in the entire languages (Kujere, 1985). The best solution is to learn English language as national and international media of communication for educated ones (that is for official and special or personal interactions and transactions). For the ethnic or local interactions, pidgin (broken), creolization, and other varieties of English can be informally used where necessary. This can be enough for the illiterates, peasants, and their likes to enjoy being together with their fellows when it comes to normal interactions in whatever business.

In conclusion, we realize that government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion, and preserving cultures. Thus, every child shall learn the language of immediate environment. Furthermore, in the interest of national unity it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three languages: Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. For smooth interaction with our neighbor countries it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French or Arabic language.

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