

GLOBALIZATION, ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND MULTILINGUAL NIGERIA

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Abstract

Globalization, in relation to language, portends “a global common language” which offers unprecedented possibilities for mutual understanding and thus enables us to find fresh opportunities for international co-operation (Crystal, 1999). Multilingualism refers to a linguistic state where numerous languages are in use by one individual or in the same nation. The spread of international languages like English, French, Chinese, etc as language of political and economic strength attracts the non speakers of these languages to learn to speak them. This paper discusses the globalization of English Language and its effects on multilingual nation like Nigeria.

Introduction

One of the dominant and pervasive problems in Nigeria and in Africa at large is the language question. Language, being a potent vehicle of transmitting cultures, values, norms and beliefs from generation to generation, remains a central factor in determining the status or nature of any nation. This informs the submissions of Isayev (1977:1992) that ‘Language is a nation’s most obvious and most important attribute. There is no such thing as a nation without a common linguistic basis’. The dominant inference from Isayev’s observation is that for national integration, cohesion and development, there must be a language acceptable to all in running nation’s affairs.

Nigeria is a West African black nation with a population of about 140 million people. It covers an area of 923,766 square kilometers, with over 200 different ethnic groups. Presently, the country is politically composed of 36 states and Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory. It is estimated that over 400 languages are spoken in Nigeria (cf. Crozier and Blench (1992), Grimes (2000), Heine and Nurse (2000)). The linguistic situation in Nigeria is such that in many states of the federation, more than one language is spoken or used. Thus multilingualism exists at the federal, state and local levels. Multilingualism at the federal level is seen in the fact that recognition is accorded to four languages (English, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba) (see the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (hereafter constitution), chapter V, section 55); at the state level multilingualism is clearly depicted in the media languages for each state. The situation in Degema local government is an example of multilingualism at the local level.

Out of the more than 400 languages spoken in the country, only three so-called major languages are accorded recognition as indigenous national languages are Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba. English, which is also one of the languages spoken in the country, an inheritance from Britain, its colonizer, is accorded the status of official language. Linguistic diversity in Nigeria has occasioned widespread bilingualism and multilingualism. Some people in the country speak at

least one language in addition to their mother tongue; some speak as many as four; still some more than four languages.

In Nigeria, like many other African nations, multilingualism is a rule, rather than an exemption, the problem of 'foregoing ahead' is of crucial importance. Among the competing language that compete for national recognition or official status, whether indigenous or foreign, one must emerge as the official language (the language of administration and education at some levels), the language of relevance from the competitors for the purpose of uniting the nation. Fortunately or unfortunately, English has emerged as that privileged language.

Globalization

The term 'globalization' has in recent times been described as both a misnomer and a euphemism. It is universally acknowledged that globalization requires as well as produces new channels, networks and practices of communication which are not dependent on geographical proximity (Toolan, 2000). By a strange paradox, these channels, networks and practices of communication depend heavily on language, yet language still remains a relatively neglected aspect of current scholarly and politically debate on globalization.

Globalization no doubt is producing new ways of not only the role played in language. Linguists are expected to be concerned with not only the role played in globalization processes by language, but also the effects of globalization process on language. The growing awareness of the challenge that globalization poses to language has moved scholars around the world, from the socio-linguistic standpoint, ask many of the same questions that dominate discussion on globalization in other areas. Prominent among these questions is the issue of linguistic diversity. Scholars are beginning to wonder whether globalization means 'Englishization' for example or whether it is more likely to lead to an increase in individual and societal multilingualism, and the preservation or revival of currently 'endangered' languages (Crystal 1997, 2000).

Multilingualism

Multilingualism is a sociolinguistic phenomenon that arises as a result of language contact. It is a situation in which three or more languages operate within the same context. Factors such as political annexation, marital relation, economic transaction, cultural association, educational acquisition and religious affliction bring about multilingualism. All those factors underpin the socio-political landscape of Nigeria today even though the combination of political annexation and economic transaction or exploitation originally brought the people referred to as Nigerians today in contact with the English people.

Crystal describes multilingualism as an alternative fundamental principal to the concept of shared global language. Multilingualism presents us with different perspectives and insights, and thus enables us to reach a more profound understanding of the nature of human mind. With multilingualism comes diversity and depth of field made possible where one language calibrates the world, one way, while another language calibrates it differently, to the point where the first way's strangeness is grasped.

The multilingual nature of the Nigerian society does not permit the use of a single indigenous language in government or education across the nation. Any attempt to do so will probably be met with resistance. Nigerians seem to prefer that English be used at all levels of government or education (as English is seen not only as the official language but also as a neutral language) rather than concede to the use of any one of the indigenous languages across the country. The 1999 constitution approves of the use of three major indigenous languages in government, in addition to English, at the federal level. This is in recognition of the contention that the choice of

any one of the three major indigenous languages would generate. Except English, the constitution is not rigid as regards which language(s) that the state governments should use in their day-to-day businesses.

English Language and Nigeria

Over the past two or three decades, English has come to occupy a singular position among languages. Previously only one among several dominant European languages, on a par with French or Spanish, it is today a world language, the language people use whenever they wish to communicate with others outside their own linguistic community. English has become the *lingua franca* of the global network; where there TCP/IP protocol secures technical communication between computers via the internet. English is the “protocol” for oral and written communication across national frontiers.

Through overt and covert means such as trade and commerce, educational policies and ordinances, missionary activities, schools, literature, constitutions, job opportunities and political might, English has successfully entrenched in Nigeria. With the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914 came the need, in a more crucial dimension, to have a common tongue for the country. With the promotion of English in every stratum of national life, including nationalist activities, about 400 Nigerian languages are being subjugated.

When Nigeria attained her political independence, “linguistic imperialism” had to be sustained in the interest of the nation. This is because there was no indigenous language that could perform the function of English because of the mutual suspicion of, and ethnic consciousness among, virtually all Nigerians.

At the risk of being alleged to be aiding and abetting “linguistic imperialism” in some quarters, the incontrovertible truth about the state of the nation today, as it was in the past, is that no indigenous language is acceptable to all Nigerians. The view presented by Nida and Wonderly (1971:65) is prevalent and correct till today. They contend that:

In Nigeria, there is simply no politically neutral language. In fact, the division into three major regions reflects the three language poles: Hausa, Yorba and Ibo. The political survival of Nigeria as a country would even be more seriously threatened than it is if any of these three languages were promoted by the government as being the one national language.

Enahoro (2002:18-19), a foremost nationalist and prominent Nigerian, contends that such official recognition of three major languages is tantamount to brazen-faced discrimination and *ipso facto* is unacceptable.

To quote Enahoro at length is not unnecessary:

All the languages of Nigeria have equal validity, or if you please equal lack of validity, before the law and under the constitution. No linguistic group has the right - the moral or constitutional right to impose his (sic) language on any other linguistic group in the country.

This shows that whether we like it or not, call it ‘linguistic imperialism’, ‘colonial mentality’, ‘inferiority complex’ or ‘pessimistic prognosis’, the fact remains that the English language will continue to triumph, and the language policy will continue to be a paper affair.

Empirically, the study of Igboanusi and Ohia (2001:125-142) involving one thousand respondents (who include doctors, lawyers, teachers, politicians, civil servants and students) in four minority language zones in the country shows that 743 or 74.3% of respondents dislike speakers of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba and 49.6% of them feel that the speakers of the three Nigerian languages do not think well of the minority language groups (Igboanusi and Ohia, 2001:130). Ultimately, the researchers report that most of the respondents (65.7%) showed preference for English as Nigeria's lingua franca. Only 19.3% of the respondents desired that their local languages become Nigeria's future lingua franca, while 5.3%, 3.6% and 6.1% of them want either Yoruba, Igbo or Hausa in the respective order, to emerge as Nigeria's future lingua franca (Igboanusi and Ohia, 2001:134).

The Effect of Globalization and English on Multilingual Nigeria

Globalization has, however, acted solely to homogenize language and promote use of English. We also find example of heightened political activity to gain recognition of, and to generally promote regional languages like Scots, Gaelic, Welsh, Catalan and Kurdish. Most of these movements have not identified their adversary as globalization per se (or for that matter, English when used as an international lingua franca), but rather the dominant language of the dominant national culture, like for example, Turkish in Turkey.

The negative impact of globalization on multilingualism is a more visible phenomenon. According to Wurm (1995:67), it has been predicted that by the end of the 21st century, some 90% of languages spoken today may disappear. Montviloff (2002:87) warns that with the introduction of multimedia technologies of communication, this phenomenon is increasing exponentially. He describes each of the 6,700 languages spoken today as a reflection of traditions, thoughts and cultures all unique in their essence. Any loss of language is a disappearance of a pool of knowledge and an impoverishment of our cultural heritage and research capacities.

Most of the information displayed on the web is in foreign languages. UNESCO questions the diversity of the content on the web and warns that children, forced to use a foreign language on the net, are at risk, as some studies have shown, of losing their mother tongue. UNESCO further describes lack of diversity of content as absence of multilingual information which in turn may lead to the loss of native cultures.

The world wide web "www" is another realm which English predominates. A tally of the languages used on the web in 2000 found that 68.4 per cent of all websites were in English. Unfortunately, the introduction of multilingualism on the internet has to contend with some technical difficulties. One of them is the fact that hardware and software were first designed to process the English text. This obviously has posed some difficulties in the processing of programmes in other languages.

In a situation like this, it is obvious that English becomes increasingly important. Though, one is uncomfortable with the negative sides of English as it 'masterminds' the relegation of the Nigerian languages to the extent that we do not have a real language policy, instantiates the systematic loss of Nigerian cultural identity among the younger generation and ensures the consolidation of colonial legacy.

Conclusion

It is clear from what we have discussed so far that Nigeria is not a nation where only three languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) are spoken. These languages are among the more than 400 languages spoken in the country. Also pointed out is the fact that multilingualism exists at the federal, state and local governments levels.

Like all multilingual nations, Nigeria is faced with the language questions. Globalization is helping the English language to dominate local languages. Like many other African nations, as the colonial language of English still remains dominant as the language of virtually all aspects of national life, politics, administration, business, sports, diplomacy, communication, media, education, constitution and others.

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