

## THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE HEGEMONY AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC EFFECTS ON INDIGENOUS NIGERIAN LANGUAGES

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### Abstract

*The English language has consistently dominated the language community in Nigeria, especially in educational, administrative and commercial platforms, where it provides a common basis for interaction. Besides providing a milieu for mutual communication, it is perceived to pose a plethora of consequential dangers to the indigenous languages. The historical background of the English language in Nigeria, the linguistic and cultural hegemony of the English language in Nigeria and the consequences of the English language hegemony are critically examined. The paper opines that the Berlin conference of 1884-85, the industrial revolution of Europe in 1750 and the abolition of Transatlantic trade in 1883 heralded the eruption of the English language in Africa and Nigeria in particular. It further argues that the English language achieved its dominant role as an international language because it has been postured as an instrument of foreign policy by the English-speaking nations. It identifies native language extinction, loss of aboriginal identity/culture and neo-colonialist tendencies of the English language as major consequences on indigenous Nigerian languages. Although the benefits of the English language are numerous, its engagement must be rationalized to functional areas, in order to preserve the cultural and social identities inherent in Nigerian indigenous languages.*

**Keywords:** English Language, hegemony, Sociolinguistics, Nigerian languages.

### Introduction

The internationalisation of the English language has played key roles in education, trade, commerce, agriculture and technological transfer. It has significantly propagated international relations and to a great extent, eliminated certain social, religious, economic and political barriers, which hitherto, may have impeded global development. Despite the multilinguistic nature of Nigeria, the English language has not only evolved as the national *lingua franca*, but has

substantially dominated the national linguistic space and brought other local languages into subjugation; this is not merely ideological, but substantive. Furthermore, it has been shown that in a multilingual setting, there is a notable tendency for one language to dominate others, which are considered subordinates. In Nigeria, the English language has become the official language and the language of instruction in educational institutions, and may likely remain so for such a long time. In corroboration, Bamgbose (1999) averred that 'it is likely that English will also remain an official language in Nigeria for a long time to come. It will probably continue to have much the same functions as at present: the principal lingua franca of educated Nigerians, the principal medium of instruction in secondary and tertiary institutions, the principal language of wider communication, and the principal medium of literary expression.'

Despite being the official language in Nigeria, the English language has continued to be an instrument of social stratification, where fluency in the language is associated with class placement. Akindele, Femi and Adegbite (2005) captured it thus; 'since it is the means of acquiring a formal education, English is synonymous with formal education in Nigeria. It is the language of the literate, the educated and apparently, of the ruling class. The ability to speak English thus, places the speaker higher on the social ladder than one who is unable to speak it; it affords the speaker the opportunity to participate fully, directly or indirectly in the affairs of governance of the nation'. Hence, the indigenous languages continue to suffer relegation in Nigeria, even after decades of decolonization, because of the social dividends which the English language offers. Therefore, Sonaiye (2007) submits thus; 'what continues to be of great concern to many in Africa is the fact that even after independence not only are European languages still being maintained within the educational system, but very little is being done to develop African languages which had suffered over a century of neglect'.

The dominance of the English language over native languages has been implicated in the extinction of the later and about 3,000 languages have been identified as being extinct or at the point of extinction globally (Okal,2014). The overall advantages of the English language as an international language may be devaluated if the perpetration of the English language portends a danger to the survival of the languages of the local people. Hence, society must design deliberate policies aimed at the development, protection and sustenance of the native languages in parity with the English language.

The paper therefore, examined the historical background of the English language in Nigeria, the linguistic and cultural hegemony of the English language in Nigeria and the consequences of the English language hegemony on indigenous Nigerian languages.

### **Historical Background of the English Language in Nigeria**

Nigeria is a multilingual nation with approximately 400 indigenous languages and about 250 ethnic groups. It has an estimated population of about 180 million people and a land mass of approximately 356,669 square miles and borders the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa (daily almanac in Danladi, 2013).

The Berlin conference of 1884-85, the industrial revolution that started in Europe in 1750 and the abolition of Trans-Atlantic trade in 1883 have been identified as events that shaped the birth of the English language in Africa and Nigeria, in particular (Akindele, Femi and Adegbite, 2005). According to them, the earliest contact between Europe and West Africa was made by the Portuguese in the 15th century. In 1831, the Portuguese built the first English Fort on the Gold Coast and shortly after this contact, they entered Nigeria through the Slave Coast. The invasion was resisted by the indigenous people, although they were subdued and forced to make treaties with the invaders. Having conquered the natives, the colonizers subsequently settled on the coast and imposed their language on the natives. Although the indigenous people had their local languages of communication, the English language became the language of administration.

The industrial revolution was remarkably contributory to the adoption of the English language in Africa. The British and Portuguese merchants recognised that Africa had a potentially large and versed market which needed to be exploited for their goods and services. On the other hand, African natives saw the need for the goods and services which the foreign merchants offered. Therefore, a trade relation was established. However, they could not effectively transact as a result of language barrier, therefore, the English language serendipitously became the language of commerce.

In Nigeria, the need to produce middle- level manpower to facilitate and maximize economic gains necessitated the quest for the acquisition of formal education in the English language and elementary book-keeping by certain Efik people who were sent by their parents to England. Upon return, these scholars were employed as cooks, interpreters, tax collectors, consular police, and guards

by the colonial merchants. The Anglicised workers enjoyed perceptible benefits and better standards of living compared with their uneducated natives. The indigenous people therefore, saw the English language acquisition as a prerequisite to economic advancement. This of course, marked the starting point of the status symbol marker which the English language symbolizes (Akindele, Femi and Adegbite, 2005).

The history of the use of English in Nigeria dated back to the early nineteenth century when freed slaves of Nigerian origin returned to Nigeria sequel to the abolition of slave trade. Many of the freed slaves had received formal education, and those with Christian orientation served as interpreters and translators during the early missionary period. The purpose was not to make converts speak English but to read the bible in their own languages (Akindele, Femi and Adegbite, 2005). With time, many natives learned the language, becoming catechists and teachers in the missionary schools. Later, the British colonized Nigeria, using English for administrative activities. Akindele, Femi and Adegbite attested that English became prominent in the educational system and was used for official purposes. It then became an elitist symbol, used by a few privileged Nigerians who were the civil servants and who served as models for no less enthusiastic indigenes who sought after formal education. Akindele, Femi and Adegbite also assert that the impact of missionary activities in the initiation of English language in the African communities is enormous. When they came to Africa to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, they needed cooks, clerks, messengers and interpreters. Their converts were recruited to perform these essential roles for them. For these categories of people to function satisfactorily and efficiently, they needed to understand and use the language of their masters. More importantly, the converts could not have escaped mastering the English language because the only version of the Bible that was available was in the English language. Their coming marked the beginning of the establishment of schools and institutions which later influenced language acquisition in no small dimension. For example, schools were established at old Calabar, C. M. S. Headquarters in Lagos and also in Abeokuta. The mission to Nigeria led by Bishop Crowther, himself a Yoruba slave educated by the Church Missionary Society in Freetown attracted evangelists and traders. Their influence upon the spread of English in West Africa has been considerable, especially as they are likely to have prized their knowledge of English as a mark of affiliation to the

colonial and missionary native English men. They became the nativist intermediaries in trade, missionary effect and administration.

According to Bamgbose (1999), by Nigeria's independence in 1960, the Nigerian English had fully been established, after about 120 years of close contact. Universities were established around the country. The new elite had been put in place, waiting to take over from the colonial masters, that some of them 'spoke English even to those with whom they shared a Nigerian language and their speeches were translated into the appropriate Nigerian languages'. The English language has thrived since its inception.

### **Linguistic and Cultural Hegemony**

Linguistic hegemony is a form of power that empowers some while disempowering others (Yoo and Namkung, 2012). Linguistic hegemony has been identified and defined as what is achieved when dominant groups create a consensus by convincing others to accept their language norms and usage as standard or paradigmatic (Mustapha, 2014). Suarez as cited in Mustapha (2014) defines hegemony as the power relations between dominant and minority groups, particularly the means by which the dominant group or the leading group secures its position. According to Yoo and Namkung (2012), linguistic hegemony is based on cultural hegemony. Defining the term 'culture', though a complex one, Pennycook as cited in Yoo and Namkung (2012) identify a number of different meanings of culture. First, culture is a set of superior values, especially embodied in works of art and limited to a small elite. Second, culture is a whole way of life, the informing spirit of a people. Third, culture is the way in which different people make sense of their lives. According to Mustapha (2014), Suarez argues that whether moral or intellectual leadership, hegemony is established through consent and persuasion via the processes of leadership without force, leadership through legitimatization and leadership through consensual rule, which are the fundamental processes of hegemony. Suarez as cited in Mustapha (2014) also added that linguistic hegemony occurs in a situation where "linguistic minorities will believe in and participate in the subjugation of the minority language to the dominant, to the point where just the dominant language remains".

Contributing to this concept, Fontana in Mustapha (2014) accepts that the total system of hegemony requires that the leading group secures its position via the

willingness and consent of the minority group and that this consent is secured through the manufacturing of mass consent, a mass belief of the naturalness and correctness of this social order. The manufacturing of this consent relies predominantly on systematic, consistent persuasion through media, and through institutions; and this persuasion will infiltrate ideas and beliefs of normalcy in daily life, so that they permeate and guide human interactions. Linguistic hegemony happens when dominant groups influence others to embrace their language norms, culture and usage as standard. Tietze & Dick also in Mustapha (2014), define hegemony as the rule of one social group over another that is achieved when the dominant group successfully projects its own particular ways of seeing the world, human and social relationships, such that those who are actually subordinated by these views, come to accept them as being "common sense" or natural; the dominated group internalizes the norms and ideology of the dominant group, even though this is not necessarily in their interests. In Mustapha's view, this is an insight to how dominant languages, the English language in particular, have assumed their place in many local communities. One of the ways of doing this is by self-projection of certain cultural values of a nation or people to the detriment of the others. This is often executed in systematic way with the intention to subdue the other nation/people to a state of subordination and inferiority. Wiley in Mustapha (2014) confirms that linguistic hegemony is also said to be ensured when some people or their agents can convince those who fail to meet those standards to view their failure as being the result of the inadequacy of their own language.

As already established, hegemony can also be cultural. According to Yoo and Namkung (2012), Gramsci's cultural hegemony refers to the "spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is historically caused by the prestige which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. Nye in Yoo and Namkung (2012) add that soft power is a more attractive and indirect way of exercising power that "one country gets other countries to want what it wants". For instance, the United States is able to exercise its power through the global spread of American culture in the medium of American English, which is more pervasive in terms of its indirect effect. Some people may argue that Americanization of culture is changing only the surface of local culture across the world and it is beneficial for the people of non-native speaking nations. However

the impact of Americanization of culture penetrates the norms and values in the medium of English (Yoo and Namkung, 2012). Argumentatively, Tsuda in Yoo and Namkung (2012) affirm that “the invasion of English and American culture is causing not only the replacement of language, but also the replacement of mental structure”. According to Suarez (2002), the Gramscian concept of hegemony, moral and intellectual leadership through consent and persuasion, is essentially comprised of three concomitant processes:

- (1) Leadership without force,
- (2) Leadership through legitimation and
- (3) Leadership through consensual rule.

Explaining these processes, she asserts that the first process, exercising leadership without force, is a form of rule where the dominant group exercises leadership over subordinate groups via the development of a consciousness, rather than an exertion of overt strength. The second process, leadership through legitimation, is a form of rule where the control of the leading group is viewed by the subordinate group as right and just, and unquestioned. The leadership of the dominant group is ‘legitimated’, taken for granted as correct. The third key process, leadership through consent, is a form of rule where the subordinate group believes that their subordinate position is at their own choice, benefits them equally, and where the subordinate group agrees that the dominant group’s needs and concerns are mutual needs and concerns.

### **Linguistic Hegemony and English in Nigeria**

The hegemony of English is evident in Nigeria. The English language offers many advantages. It is the official language in the country. Attesting to this fact, Yoo and Namkung (2012) support that English as an international language provides many advantages, i.e., educational and employment opportunities. Scholars and scientists especially benefit from the volume of academic information available in English and have more chances to disseminate their academic achievement to other scholars worldwide. Learning English as an international language provides an access to popular American culture (e.g., Hollywood films, television soap operas, music, international news and other forms of mass media). As there is a great deal of convenience in common communication, international and intercultural exchanges of products, as well as the ideas and values, have been welcomed by most people of the world. Most

significantly, the English language has portrayed immense benefit in international trade, and the English language acquisition is a mechanism for engaging in global economics. Crystal cited in Mustapha (2014) says, it is the global language, the international lingua franca. Ammon in Mustapha (2014) also says that English is the dominant language in scientific communication with 70-80% academic publications in the language, the de facto official and working language in most international organizations, and the most taught second/foreign language across the world. According to Yoo and Namkung (2012), the theoretical framework of linguistic hegemony is closely related to linguistic imperialism. Phillipson in Yoo and Namkung (2012) argue that English achieved its dominant position as the principal world language because it has been actively promoted as an instrument of foreign policy of the major English-speaking states. Yoo and Namkung (2012) summarize that Phillipson's studies clearly demonstrate the current position of English as a global language. He argues that the current position of English is not an accidental or natural result of forces. Rather, English-speaking countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, deliberately use government policies to promote the worldwide use of English for economic and political purposes. Hence, the English language is so widely used today that teaching and learning English has become a major business of high commercial value. The spread of the English language education is not only good for business, but it is "good business".

According to Yoo and Namkung (2012), Phillipson distinguished between "core" and "periphery" English-speaking countries. In his framework, the core English-speaking countries are the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The periphery English-speaking countries are of the following two types:

- 1) English serves as an important but limited communicative function as an "international link language" in Japan, Scandinavia and elsewhere; and
- 2) In countries such as India, Nigeria, Ghana, and elsewhere, English was imposed in colonial times and was "successfully transplanted" as a dominant language for intra-national communication. Therefore, English plays a fundamental role in sociopolitical processes of imperialism and neocolonialism (Yoo and Namkung, 2012). In this context, the spread of English can never be



neutral but is always drawn to global inequality (Philipson in Yoo and Namkung, 2012). Thus, the spread of English is a “result of policies adopted by core countries to bring about the worldwide hegemony of English, for the benefit of core country institutions and individuals (Philipson in Yoo and Namkung, 2012).

Suarez's citation of Phillipson in Mustapha (2014) elaborates how linguistic hegemony functions:

The top language benefits through the image-making of the ads of transnational corporations and the connotations of English with success and hedonism. These symbols are reinforced by an ideology that glorifies the dominant language and serves to stigmatize others, this hierarchy being rationalised and internalized as normal and natural, rather than as expression of hegemonic values and interests. Linguistic hegemony is asserted in multiple ways, for example international scientific collaboration is increasingly dominated by English (Koplan in Suarez,2002). According to Suarez, daily forms of linguistic hegemony include using the media, institutions and social relationships to associate linguistic minorities with inferiority, lower self-esteem, and belittlement – yet, to conversely present positive associations with the dominant language and culture. In discussing linguistic hegemony,

Awonusi in Mustapha (2014) assert:

Hegemony with relation to language connotes a fairly complex interplay of a number of variables such as power (socioeconomic power of its users), control (how the powerful users of a particular language use it as a weapon of linguistic domination of communities especially those that are multilingual or multicultural), legitimacy (the dependence on a language as the basis of social and political acceptance) and influence (the exercise of power – oftentimes in its coercive form and, sometimes, diplomacy such that the influence of a language is enhanced either from policies such as those of expansionism on the one hand or those of socio-political co-operation on the other hand.

These descriptions appeal to the situation of English in Nigeria, which locks horns with the indigenous languages, some gearing towards extinction. The English language has assumed a favourable position in the Nigeria society. It is

the prerequisite for gaining admission into higher education, no Nigerian language has assumed this status. Akindele, Femi and Adegbite add, 'since it is the means of acquiring a formal education, English is synonymous with formal education in Nigeria. It is the language of the literate, the educated and apparently, of the ruling class. The ability to speak English thus places the speaker higher on the social ladder than one who is unable to speak it; it affords the speaker the opportunity to participate fully, directly or indirectly in the affairs of governance of the nation'. To Mustapha, English has emerged to become second to only one language in the world, which is the Chinese (in terms of speakers-population). In terms of geographical coverage, English might be considered a global language that is second to none. It has not only resisted the influence of some world powers' languages such as Latin, Greek, and French but it has also acquired a high status among national languages of former British colonies where the local people shed off British colonial powers but maintained former lords' language. Today, statistics show the following about the English language amongst its users as native speakers (ENL) in the United Kingdom, the United States of America, New Zealand, Australia, Trinidad and Tobago, parts of Canada. The statistics also show second language speakers of English (ESL) in Nigeria, Ghana, the Gambia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, India, Pakistan, Singapore, Hong Kong; foreign language users (EFL) in Germany, France, Sweden, China; and English language learners (ELL). These classifications are sometimes helpful in distinguishing users of English. First, the native speakers (England, The United States of America, and the others); second, former British colonies such as India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Ghana, Hong Kong who are today in "possession of English in the postcolonial era" and have 'domesticated' English to suit their socio-cultural environment as second language users; and third, foreign language users where British rule has never been experienced but the use of English is being encouraged. The second group's varieties of English are native to their users because "they possess legitimate endonormative varieties when they use English in a number of domains." Thus, they are part of the 'global Englishes' and their varieties are norm-evolving unlike foreign language users of English who are norm-dependent and rely on British and American English for their norm. The English language is the only language of communication between speakers of different ethnic groups. It is the only language that binds Nigeria together.

Akindele and Wale identify three broad functions of English in Nigeria. They include: accommodation, participation and social mobility. In performing the accommodation function, the English language is recognized as a world language; so it performs international function. It serves as a link between people of multilingual societies of Africa and the outside world. It is the language of international politics, trade and sports. For instance at the OAU, UNO and the Commonwealth, Nigeria has no language other than English for taking part in the deliberations. All these are made possible because of the large number of English speakers. English also serves as the official language in the country. It is the language with which the government conducts its business. It is the language that literate people from different ethnic groups use to communicate with one another. English is used as a matter of political expediency. It is retained so as to bring about political stability in the country. The choice of one of the indigenous languages may create some problems. This, in order to allay the fear of domination, there is the need for a neutral language that will serve official purposes. Some other instances of English usage for accommodation can also be given. Street traders who are illiterate force themselves to learn and use marginal English in transaction with buyers who do not understand their own indigenous language. Also, users who are bilingual in their mother tongues and English find it sometimes convenient to address their bilingual listeners in English when they are uncertain as to appropriate forms of address e.g. singular or honorific pronouns in indigenous language use. In view of the prominent role assigned English in the Nigerian constitution the participation function of the language becomes crucial to the lives of people. Those who wish to participate in the social, political and economic life of the country must 'know' English. Proficiency in English is generally required for admission to parliament, to the bench and bar, civil service, essential services, etc. Also, schools have been entrusted with the task of socializing children to be active participants in the life of the nation. The medium of instruction from upper primary to tertiary level is English. In terms of social mobility, the ability to use English enhances both horizontal and vertical mobility of people. Because of the prestige attached to the language, a speaker is considered an illiterate if s/he cannot speak English, even when such a person is literate in the mother tongue. The English language is the language of the institutions left behind by the colonizer e.g. education, technology, administration, judiciary and executive.

Adeyemi (2008) notes that in the wake of the hegemonic influence of foreign languages like English and French, African languages in these modern times are being marginalised in terms of acquisition, learning, and use. Other scholars have reported similar position in their works. For example, it has been observed that the neglect of indigenous languages in Nigeria could be attributed to the fatal effects of interventions like the slave trade, colonialism, and advent of foreign religions (Mustapha, 2014). According to Adeyemi, efforts to revitalize African local languages have recorded little or no success. He holds that achieving this goal in Africa has turned out to be a wishful fantasy in view of the apparent disuse of African local languages in our development processes. Nothing is still done to revitalize the indigenous languages. Sonaiye represents the idea in these words "... what continues to be of great concern to many in Africa is the fact that even after independence not only are European languages still being maintained within the educational system, but very little is being done to develop African languages which had suffered over a century of neglect".

However, to Mustapha, the other school of thought that tends to cheer the dominance of English opines that there are factors that justify its hegemonic status. Thus, the general claim in literature is that going by the rapid development, acceptance and use of English in Nigeria, the local languages are not only being endangered but also there is a widespread language shift that might lead to language loss if practical steps are not taken in time. The attitude of the majority of Nigerians is favourable to English. In most Nigerian homes, parents relate with their children in English even, relegating their indigenous languages to the background. The local languages have become 'second class'. Also, English has so much influenced the cultures of Nigerians. This is seen in dressing, food, table manners, sports, entertainment etc. Euromonitor International in Mustapha certifies that as of 2009, 53% of Nigeria's population speak English: "the vast majority of these 53% speak Nigerian Pidgin - an English-based Pidgin or Creole." Perhaps, Nigerian Pidgin can be more widely accepted and in use than any other language in Nigeria. It cannot be denied that like other languages of the world, Nigerian languages (aside from Nigerian English) are negatively impacted by the dominance of English as the "hegemonic and neo-colonialist language".

### **Consequences of Language Hegemony**

The consequences of the imposition of one language against another, either consciously or unconsciously could lead to several consequences. These consequences are:

- a. **Language death:** According to Okal, there are more than 3,000 languages spoken in the world today that are at the point of dying and some are already extinct. In Kenya for instance, Suba, Elmolo, Oropom, Lorkoti, Yaaku, Sogoo, Kore, Segeju, Omotik, Kinare, Bong'om, Terik, Dahalo and even Burji are considered dead. He identifies the causes of language death as imposition of languages on the others, language colonialism, foreign language dictatorship and assimilation of languages, crude suppression of native languages. The results of successful linguistic hegemony are often language shift from the minority language to the majority language and, ultimately, language loss (Suarez, 2002).
- b. The loss of a people's identity and the culture they represent. This involves the loss of our myths, folktales, dressing, dance, music, food and heritage.
- c. Language hegemony is a form of neocolonialism. It is the indirect control of a nation's administration through language. No doubt, China is gradually penetrating countries of the world with its language. If nothing is done to preserve the indigenous languages, in a short time to come, English may even be abandoned for Chinese, owing to the promises it offers.

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