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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the choice of official languages in Nigeria first gives an overview of the current language situation in Nigeria, particularly of indigenous language usage, sketches the history of English, French, and Anglo-Nigerian Pidgin (ANP) both before and after independence, outlines the main proposals for language planning, and draws some conclusions about possible directions to be taken. Sociolinguistic profiles of the main languages (English, ANP, Hausa, Yoruba, and Ibo) are presented in both narrative and chart form, and include information about: their status in education at all levels; usage in international, national, and sub-regional contexts; presence/absence of standard orthography, linguistic research, and established literature; cultural, national, and social identity and social prestige; use in national and foreign media, business, and commerce; and role in parliament, political campaigns, religious preaching, and courts of justice. Each language is given a score based on its profile characteristics. It is argued that while English can not be replaced, realistically, in the near future with another official language, an effort should be made to find an indigenous language alternative for the long term. Establishment of a national language commission is encouraged and a structure is outlined. Contains 18 references. (MSE)

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CHOOSING AN INDIGENOUS OFFICIAL LANGUAGE FOR NIGERIA

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Introduction

The question what language a multi-ethnic, multilingual new nation should adopt has become one of the classic problems facing most developing nations. Nigeria is no exception to this generalisation. Nigeria became independent in 1960, and like most new African nations has been forced to grapple with multiethnicity, acute multilingualism, illiteracy, political instability, economic underdevelopment and mass poverty.

Nigeria has a population of about 120 million people, spread among 200 or so ethnic groups, who use about the same number of languages and dialects. One out of every five Africans is a Nigerian: the "Giant of Africa" boasts the greatest concentration of Black people in the world. Because of this, linguistic decisions made in Nigeria are not only of national importance.

Discussion about what language should be used for official purposes in Nigeria is usually avoided because of ethnic tensions. Among the Nigerian urban elite, the widely held view is that there is no reason to change the status quo. English is currently the official language, and there is no reason to raise one or more of the indigenous languages to similar status. While there is no immediate threat to English, there are good grounds for re-examining the socio-linguistic profile, and preparing possible alternatives to the present state of affairs. These ideas will be examined in detail in the next section. Suffice it to say for the moment, that the position of English as official language in Nigeria is not necessarily a fait accompli.

This paper will review the current language situation in Nigeria, the history and state of language planning, and enumerate the procedures to be followed if language policies are to be modified or the present arrangement maintained. Language is a resource of the nation. Its use in education, internal mass communication, and international communication needs to be planned and well-managed for its benefits to be fully realised. This requires a well-articulated and continually re-evaluated policy of language resource management.

Some clarifications are necessary before we go further. Firstly, the domain of this paper, language planning, should be understood as "deliberate language change...changes in the systems of language code or speaking that are planned by organisations that are established for such purposes or given a mandate to fulfill such purposes" (Rubin and Jernudd 1971:xvi), and "the organised pursuit of solutions to language problems, typically at the national level" (Fishman 1974:210). Secondly, it is important to clear up the distinction between an "official language" and a "national language". A "national language" is an indigenous language whose status has been raised to the national level so as to allow its speakers direct access to and participation in specific national domains - education, legislation, administration, etc. Usually, a "national language" is not recognised as a language of world communication. An "official language", on the other hand is a language formally selected at the national level for all aspects of officialdom, and would normally take precedence over a national language in any formal context. An "official language" is, often, a language of world communication. However, there are some cases where more than one language enjoys the status of official language. In the context of Nigeria, Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba are regarded as national languages, while English is regarded as the sole official language.

The language situation in Nigeria

Nigeria can most appropriately be regarded as a multinational exoglossic state, and should be categorised under Group C of Fishman's (1968) classification, i.e., a state made up of diverse nations in the process of forging a nationality by emphasising political-operational integration. Nigeria's indigenous languages fall into two groups: Niger-Congo in the south, and Tchado-Semitic and Sudanic in the north.

Apart from English, Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba are considered the three major indigenous languages of Nigeria. These languages enjoy national language status - the 1979 Federal Constitution recognised their use in the national legislative assemblies - while all other languages are regarded as minor languages. Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba would not qualify as major languages if Ferguson's (1966) criteria for national language profile formulae are strictly applied. It is more likely that they have been elevated to this status in recognition of the "Great Traditions" they represent, in recognition of the numbers of people who speak them, and as a hesitant move in the direction of greater cultural authenticity.

Hausa is spoken predominantly in what is still sometimes referred to as "Northern Nigeria". The dialect of Kano, a historical and commercial centre, serves as its standard. Hausa is a regional lingua franca, and is spoken by millions of other Northern tribespeople (Fulani, Kanuri, Tuareg, Nupe, Tiv, etc) as a second language. Before and immediately after independence, it was used as the official language of the Northern Region.

Yoruba is spoken natively by an estimated 20 million people in the south-western and western parts of the country. The Oyo dialect has been adopted as its standard. Yoruba can also be regarded as a regional lingua franca in so far as it is acquired as a second language by other minority tribes living close by - Ijaws, Edos, Igbiras, etc.

Ibo is spoken principally in the south-eastern part of Nigeria, and the Owerri dialect is its reference. It cannot be regarded as a regional lingua franca in the same way that Hausa and Yoruba are.

The principal minor languages of Nigeria are: Fulfulde, Kanuri, Tiv, Nupe, Igala, Idoma (in the North); Edo, Efik, Ijaw, Itshakiri (in the South). The fears of these minorities, who believe that they are victims of a vague policy of internal imperialism contrived by the majority tribes, are probably best expressed by Chief Anthony Enahoro (Schwarz, 1965:41)

As one who comes from a minority tribe, I deplore the continuing evidence in this country that people wish to impose their customs, their languages, and even more their way of life upon smaller tribes.

This outline of the language situation in Nigeria would not be complete without an examination of the position of English, Anglo-Nigerian pidgin and French. English is the official language of Nigeria. Its use and spread are continued in urban centres, where it is spoken as a second or third language. It is for this reason regarded as a national lingua franca. Its penetration is not deep; few Nigerians, even among the well-educated, speak good standard English. Probably less than 10% of the population speak it at all. English in Nigeria is best classified as a language of special information (Ferguson 1966).

Anglo-Nigerian pidgin developed in the coastal and delta regions, where it has its most proficient speakers. Though not enjoying any formal recognition, it has become the most

used language of intertribal communication, region-wide. Mainly used in urban centres, it certainly has more speakers than English.

The study of French in Nigerian schools is mainly due to the fact that all Nigeria's neighbours are francophone. French has little or no penetration in society, and has remained a subject of instruction for University students of Modern European Languages. French too is therefore a language of special information.

Pre- and post-independence language policies in Nigeria.

It is quite difficult to describe the formal interventions of past governments - be they colonial or Nigerian - in the domain of language usage in Nigeria as language policies in the true sense of the term. The formal procedures of (i) data collection, (ii) examination of options, (iii) decision making based on (i) and (ii), (iv) implementation of (iii), and (v) evaluation of (iv) have not always been assiduously and meticulously followed. It is for this reason, that we regard these formal interventions of Government in the use of language as language regulation rather than language planning.

1: pre-independence language regulation

It is common knowledge that British colonial policy, unlike the assimilationist policy of the French, was one of indirect rule. Colonized peoples were left to evolve in their traditional sociopolitical and cultural systems. The colonial government respected and used their traditional hierarchies as a means of reaching the people. The British did not aspire to remake Nigeria in their own image, but concentrated their efforts in the field of economic exploitation. Prator (1968:472) attributes this policy to "the Briton's great interest in or respect for cultures other than his own coupled with his tendency to keep people of other races or nationalities at arm's length and to the generally pragmatic nature of British colonial policy. it could also be interpreted, however, as the expression of a desire not to complicate a sometimes confusing exotic experience.

It was the Christians who were the pioneers of systematic research on the language resources of each ethnic community they found themselves in. Their attempts to codify these languages, can justly be regarded as the first language planning the colonies had ever known. The colonial government, at first indifferent, got progressively more interested in the activities of the missions. Grants-in-aid were disbursed to voluntary agency schools, and later

Education codes were promulgated to regulate the educational system:

In 1882, the 1st Education Ordinance for West Africa decreed the sole use of English in teaching.

In 1922, the Phelps-Stokes commission recommended the use of the tribal language for lower classes in primary education, and the language of the "European nation in control" in the upper classes.

The European language Examination scheme required all Europeans to be conversant with one or more local mother tongues.

1926 saw the establishment of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures.

In 1927, the memorandum of the Conference of Colonial Officers on problems pertaining to mother tongue education in Africa advised that the mother tongue should be the basis of instruction, at least for primary education.

1931 saw papers in African languages offered in the London Matriculation examinations.

In spite of these developments, the attitude of successive British colonial governments in Nigeria is one of quasi-indifference and passivity, with very little intervention by government. By the time Nigeria reached independence, some Nigerian languages - Yoruba, Hausa, Ibo, Nupe, Efik and Igala - had been codified, elaborated and given an orthography, mainly thanks to the efforts of the Christian missions. In the South, initial primary education was being conducted in the mother tongue, while English took over for the remainder of the educational programme. In the North, Hausa was used for primary education.

2: the post-independence period
Since independence, successive Federal Nigerian governments have shifted from a neutralist/conformist posture to a pacifist/authenticist one. In their attempt to handle with care the still fragile unity of the country, the use of English as the sole official language has been maintained in all Federal matters, in secondary and tertiary education, and in broadcasting and media. By 1964, the UNESCO Conference on the use of mother tongue for literacy indicated that "Nigeria ... had arrived at no stated policy." (Armstrong 1968:232). In 1969, the Nigerian National Curriculum Conference upheld the view that the Nigerian primary school child should be "well-grounded in his mother tongue" for purposes of basic education. (Adaralegbe 1969:214). Northern Nigeria, nonetheless, opted for a "straight for English" approach, in which English would be introduced into primary education right from the first years.

By 1967, the creation of 12 states within the Federation led to greater autonomy over language. For instance, the Rivers Readers Project (Williamson 1976), which carried out an extensive survey of the various mother tongues of the Rivers state, was one of the products of state autonomy in language regulation. The six-year primary school project of the Western State (Afoylan 1976) was another.

The Federal Education Policy of 1977 made it mandatory for every secondary school pupil to learn at least one of the major languages in the first three years; in the event that he already spoke one of them as a mother tongue, he was obliged to select one of the other two for study. The Federal Constitution of 1979 states:

"The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, and in Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made therefore."

and

"The business of a 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 languages spoken in the State as the House may by resolution approve".

The Federal Constitution indicates that vernaculars can be used in the Federal Houses, as long as there is provision of adequate arrangements. On the other hand, the State House of Assembly provision does not mention any particular vernacular, and leaves each legislature to take such a decision as it may deem fit.

Today, in the absence of civilian legislative assemblies, English remains the sole official language of Nigeria for administration, the medium of instruction for the greater part of education, and the first language of the media. The national languages, Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba, are used informally in administration - probably more so than English - in the states where they are preeminent. In states where none of these major languages predominates (e.g. in Bendel State), a number of minority languages are used for broadcasting. The Federal Radion Corporation (Benin) broadcasts in Edo, Urhobo, Ijaw, Isoko and Itshekiri.

The options so far

This section discusses the main proposals for language planning in Nigeria. While the official language question is primary in this paper, I believe that the whole spectrum of language planning strategies might be more important in the long run.

Table 1: Sociolinguistic profiles of Nigeria's major language options

	ENG	ANP	HAU	YOR	IBC
primary education	+	-	+	+	+
secondary education	+	-	-	-	-
University	+	-	-	-	-
Science and Technology taught in secondary school	+	-	-	-	-
taught in University	+	-	+	+	+
International lingua franca	+	+	+	+	+
National lingua franca	+	+	-	-	-
sub-regional lingua franca	+	+	+	-	-
standard orthography	+	-	+	+	+
linguistic research	+	-	-	-	-
established literature	+	-	+	+	+
cultural identity	-	-	+	+	+
national identity	-	+	-	-	-
social identity	-	+	-	-	-
social prestige	+	-	+	+	+
national media	+	+	+	+	+
foreign media	+	-	+	-	-
business/commerce	+	+	+	+	+
parliament	+	-	+	+	+
political campaigns	+	+	+	+	+
religious preaching	+	+	+	+	+
courts of justice	+	-	+	+	+
TOTAL SCORE:	20	9	17	15	15

Table 1 shows my own assessment of the sociolinguistic usage patterns of the main language options (see Mann forthcoming for further discussion, particularly concerning the high scoring of English and the low scores of ANP).

Hausa

The position of Hausa is strongly supported by demographic

and sociolinguistic facts. Hausas make up about 25% of the total population of Nigeria -- 30 million speakers. Hausa serves as a lingua franca in the whole of the Nigerian North. Paden (1968:200) refers to it as the largest integral political unit in Africa". Extensive linguistic research on Hausa, and a large range of publications are available. Trans-border communication in Hausa is possible all along the West African Sahel belt. International radio stations broadcast in Hausa. Finally, Hausa is generally regarded as an easy language to learn. Of all the major languages of Nigeria, Hausa is the only one to enjoy this reputation. However, in spite of these positive factors, Hausa suffers a real ethnopolitical drawback: tribal tensions in Nigeria are still so high that it would be politically impossible to adopt Hausa as the one national government.

Wazobia

The word wazobia is an amalgam of the various words for come in Yoruba, Hausa and Ibo. In the wazobia option, Nigerian children would pick up minimal communicative skills in each of the three major languages. This option is a symbolic compromise solution, which appeases the major tribes, but ignores the minor ones. It is basically a sentimentalist solution, and fails to consider how an indigenous language can be extended to cope with the demands of the modern world. This option was intensively promoted in the early 1980s.

A variant of the wazobia solution in official quadrilingualism, mooted by Ogundipeleslie, who suggests that the Nigerian child learn his mother tongue, one other major Nigerian language, English and then French. This option suffers from the same drawbacks as the wazobia option. Many Nigerian children grow up acquiring at least three languages with varying degrees of proficiency, and usually they have some contact with French at secondary school level. This makes them practically, though informally, quadrilingual. However, formalisation of this individual multilinguality is hardly the solution to the nation's language problems. It exposes the Nigerian child to four geopolitically significant languages, but does not necessarily provide mastery of any.

Swahili

Swahili, a hybrid regional lingua franca, has also been proposed by Nigerians with Panafricanist aspirations, notably Soyinka. They see this choice as taking the unifying potential of language beyond Nigerian borders, while dispensing with the language relics of the former European colonies. Swahili has the merit of being non-tribal, and,

like Hausa, is considered easy to learn. There is a basic feeling, however, that Nigeria does not need to import any foreign language for her own national purposes.

Esperanto and Guosa

Like Esperanto, Guosa is an artificial language, an attempt by Peter Igbinokwe to construct an indigenous language for a united Nigeria, by borrowing elements and structures from both major and minor Nigerian languages. Esperanto, proposed by Farukuoye 1983, seems unsuitable because of its typological distance from the language families in Nigeria. Both Guosa and Esperanto possess a socio-historico-cultural void that cannot easily be filled, and makes it difficult for these codes to operate fully as languages, rather than as simple means of communication.

Anglo-Nigerian pidgin

Although often associated with Nigeria's colonial past, Anglo-Nigerian pidgin (ANP) was probably already in existence in the multilingual delta area before the coming of the Portuguese and the British. These two latter events represent two main stages of adlexification. The evidence strongly suggests that Anglo-Portuguese input to ANP is principally, if not solely, at the level of lexis. All other levels of language show clear signs of overwhelming input from indigenous languages.

While ANP still has to overcome the stigma of being "bastardised" or "broken" English, it is probably the language of widest interethnic communication in Nigeria today. It has more speakers than English, and it has the edge over Hausa in that it is a non-tribal language, easier to acquire over a larger range of ethnolinguistic groupings. Like Bahasa Indonesia - a trade lingua franca adopted as official language in Indonesia - ANP "can unify without arousing hostility and can provide a natural response to the local environment and the multilingual context" (LePage 1964:79). Its most serious handicaps are its lack of prestige, and its lack of literary resources.

ANP is used for news broadcasts, record request programmes, drama and advertising on Federal radio and TV stations. It is also used for feature articles and poetry in the print media.

English

The advantages of English as a world language do not need to be rehearsed here. English serves as a national lingua franca in Nigeria, but its typological distance from the indigenous language structures and world views speak against it as a

permanent choice. There is also the problem that imposing a Western language clearly underlines how the imposition of a Western language creates social inequalities between social classes, and emphasises the urban/rural dichotomy.

Other views

A number of Nigerian academics have contributed to the national language debate, though these ideas are not widely discussed outside academic circles. See Osaji (1979), Rufai (1982), Okonkwo (1975) and Shofunke (1986).

The way forward

It is obviously impossible in a multilingual state like Nigeria to satisfy the all demands of every ethnodialectal group, either at the state or at the national level. Choices have to be made at both these levels about language use.

My own view is that while English cannot realistically be replaced as official language in the near future, more vigorous efforts should be made to find an indigenous alternative for the long term. English should assume a role as Nigeria's first foreign language, with French as the second foreign language.

While it is important to stress the need for some degree of linguistic homogeneity for the purposes of national development, it is not necessary to commit linguistic genocide against the minority languages. The 1977 Federal Education policy compels people to learn one of the three major languages at Junior Secondary School level, and there is no gainsaying the fact that this amounts to coercion, and is a diversion. Since each student can choose among three languages (or two in the case of major language speakers), the linguistic quantities and choice patterns of the student's verbal repertoire would seem to be of secondary importance. All that is achieved is that students are forced to learn one more Nigerian tribal language, classified as "major". The policy is based on the fallacious assumption that the mere fact of converging the multilingual repertoire of citizens towards the major tribal languages is enough to guarantee greater national unity and understanding.

We need to recognise that there is a delicate balance between the instrumental and the sentimental use of language in a multilingual context. To some extent, this is already recognised in the media. In education, however, the situation is more complex, and considerable changes will need to be made if an indigenous official language replaced English as the official language of instruction. These changes would

mainly concern the time accorded to English in the curriculum, but it would also be necessary to consider which vernacular to use for primary education (usually the child's mother tongue, though this might not always be the case), which vernacular might be used at secondary school level (not necessarily the one used in primary school), and whether English should be retained as the official language of instruction in higher education.

A National language Commission

Nigeria urgently needs to approach the national/official language question frankly and frontally by the establishment of an active National Language Commission, with branches, called language committees, at state and local government levels throughout the country. The primary objective of this body should be to serve as a databank on all language-related matters. It will advise the Federal and other governments, and relevant ministeries on language affairs. It will also promote the preservation and enrichment of Nigeria's language resources. The commission and its committees should be multidisciplinary, with members spanning all relevant professional fields. The present situation, where all language matters are left in the hands of departments of linguistics and Nigerian languages of the Universities is not satisfactory. The National Commission will also be expected to map out strategies for educational development through mother tongues, for broadcasting, and to promote publicity campaigns in the event of an indigenous official language being finally chosen. Its research interests should include monitoring the training of language teachers across the nation.

Conclusion

Broadly speaking, a new nation's attempts to resolve linguistic dilemmas fall into one of two kinds: a linguistically homogenizing approach or a linguistically pluralistic one. The hope for Nigeria is to plan for uniformity in the instrumental aspects of language, but for diversity in the sentimental aspects. The crucial point, however, is that there should be a well defined language plan, that is subject to regular evaluation and adjustments.

The final decision as to what language is used for what sociolinguistic functions in a society is a political one. The linguist's humble duty is to have been seen to have done the spadework that leads to more rational decisions, of wider social acceptance.

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