

The Languages in Nigerian Socio-political Domains: Features and Functions

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Abstract

This paper views Nigeria as a multilingual country with diverse languages and cultures to the extent that the total number of languages spoken right now in Nigeria is about 500 (See Adegbite 2010). This linguistic diversity in the country has occasioned the development and the spread of the concepts of bilingualism, multilingualism, diglossia and language choice. As a result of this diversity, it is noticed that the phenomenon of Language Choice has become inevitable on the language use habit of Nigerians as every domain of language use has its language features. This is because both the indigenous (major and minor) and foreign languages have distinct domains of usage. However, despite the multilingual nature of the languages in the country, English Language is the dominant language in almost all the domains, and specifically, it is used for all government functions. This is mainly due to historical, multi-ethnic and cultural nature of the country.

Keywords: languages, bilingualism, multilingualism, diglossia, domains

1. Introduction

The number of languages spoken in Nigeria is still not clear. There have been various views and opinions about it, for instance, (Osaji 1979, Bamgbose 1971; Brann 1990) put the number at about 400 (Adegbija 1991a 1989). The most recent speculation puts the number between 450 and 500 (Omodiagbe 1992 and Adegbite 2010). Undoubtedly, there are many languages in Nigeria both indigenous and foreign that exist side by side. These languages are assigned different roles or functions depending on the domains and occasions. Therefore, language use situation in Nigeria is different from what obtains in other bilingual and monolingual countries like Canada where there are two languages: French and English, and Japan where a single language is used for all activities.

There is the government policy concerning domains of language use in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1979), and the National Policy on Education (1977, 1985, 2004). It is obvious that government understands the importance of clear allocation of roles to languages (both indigenous and foreign languages). Government also recognizes that in Nigeria, language is a means of promoting social interaction, national cohesion and cultures; hence every child is mandated to learn the language of the immediate environment. Furthermore, in the national interest, it is expedient that every child is required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Furthermore, it is stated that:

For smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria and it shall be compulsory in primary and Junior Secondly Schools but as a non-vocational Elective at the Senior School (cf. NPE, Revised, 2004)

However, despite government and individual efforts to plan and allocate distinct roles to each of these languages in well-stated domains, the phenomena of borrowing, interference, code-switching, code-mixing, domestication or nativisation of foreign languages, particularly, the English language are still a hindrance. These phenomena are products of language contact, co-existence of both foreign and indigenous in the Nigerian multilingual environment. Speakers of English or other foreign languages (Arabic, French) and indigenous languages tend to switch from one to the other because of the existence of these languages in their linguistic repertoires.

Multilingualism relates to speaking or using several languages; so, it is possible for an individual or a society to be multilingual. The Nigerian society is multilingual considering the number of languages existing in the country and the nature of her multilingualism represents a case of linguistic and cultural diversity *par excellence*. It is

more complex and intricate than multilingual European countries like Belgium, Switzerland, or Sweden and other countries like South Africa, Singapore, India and Pakistan where there are just few languages. It has been realized that, the more the number of diverse languages and cultures, the more intricate and the more complex language planning decisions are likely to be.

In the same vein, Akindele and Adegbite (1999), submit that due to the existence of various ethnic groups in Nigeria with over 400 languages, Nigeria is therefore a multilingual and multicultural speech community where diverse languages and cultures compete. It is also a speech community with not only the indigenous languages but also foreign languages which compete with the indigenous languages and cultures. English is used to perform official and national functions, while the various indigenous languages are used for interaction in their respective domains.

It is also observed that contacts between indigenous languages and cultures have greater potential for enhancing harmonious inter-language and inter-cultural communication. Such contacts also result in increase in the level of multilingualism and multiculturalism. For instance, Ebira and Ogori-Magongo people are put in the same political administrative constituency, and this increased the level of contact among them. Trading at Obehira, Okene, Ogboroke, Ogori and Magongo markets has created constant links between Ebira speaking and Oko-osanyin speaking people, resulting in inter-marriages. Consequently, many Ebira people have settled in the Oshobane area of Ogori after such marriages (Adegbija 1992a).

Joshua (1991), reports cases of increased multilingualism in Sagamu area of Ogun State, where trading brought the Hausa to settle there. Many of them have inter-married with the Yoruba and live harmoniously with their hosts. Similarly, some of these Hausa, through constant relationships with the Yoruba and business transactions have acquired the Yoruba language while the Yoruba, also, have achieved some level of competence in Hausa. This situation cannot be denied in 'Sabo' (places where the Hausa settle in major towns or cities in Nigeria). Also, Adegbija (2004), cites an example of some Fulani cattle rearers who have settled in Osara in Kogi State. Along with their slaughtering of cows for the community, a highly valued service, many of them learned Ebira, the local language. Such contacts increase intellectual diffusion and broaden the culture, the outlook and attitudinal tolerance of the people with different languages and cultures. In such a context, individual and societal multilingualism are common phenomena that smoothen and lubricate channels of intercultural contacts and communication.

2. Functional Classification of Languages in Nigeria

The different domains of the use of the various languages in Nigeria are classified into three categories as follows:

- (a) Indigenous or native language: Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo have been constitutionally recognized as 'major'.
- (b) Exogenous or non-indigenous: In this category, we have English, French Arabic and other languages like German and Russia which have a rather restricted functional scope.
- (c) Pidgin languages: This is represented by Nigerian Pidgin English, with a dual status of being at once indigenous and now exogenous.

The indigenous languages vary greatly in functional, structural, and spatial characteristics. It has been noted that the celebrity of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba is as a result of their numerical strength in terms of their number of speakers (Harm 1991). These languages are followed by Fulfulde, Ibibio, Efik, Kanuri Tiv, Nupe, Ijo, Edo, Igala, etc. It is discovered that over 500,000 people speak each of these languages. (Akinnaso 1991, Jibril 1990)

The three major languages in Nigeria perform official functions side by side with the English language. They are used in some cases for the conduct of business in the civil service, law, commerce and education and all other official domains. For instance, English, Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba are allowed for conduct of legislative functions in the States' Houses of Assembly in Nigeria. They also play a prominent role in education in recent years. It is officially stated in the National Policy on Education (NPE) that the mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction in the first two years of primary school.

English has been more noticeable in use in Nigeria. It serves various functions as well as official language as the second language. It remains the language of bureaucracy of government, of education, of commerce, of science and technology, of inter-ethnic cooperation and contacts, etc. French is in every sense of the word, a foreign language in Nigeria and its impact on the country is rather limited to a few schools such as universities where it is learnt as a school subject and used in diplomatic contacts, especially with Nigerian immediate neighbours in Chad, Niger, Benin, Togo and Cameroon and with other foreign embassies. It was made second official language during the Sani Abacha era but has a limited number of speakers. Arabic is mainly a predominant language of

Islamic religion and aids Koranic schools in Nigeria today. It is also learnt as a school subject in some universities, such as the University of Ibadan, Usman Dan Fodio University, Sokoto, as well as Bayero University, Kano.

The third category of languages in Nigeria is the Nigerian Pidgin; which is a hybrid Nigerian language. There have been several ideas and views about its origin whether it is indigenous or exogenous. Omodiagbe (1992), comments that 'Pidgin is an offshoot of the pure 'English of the early missionaries and colonial administrators'. It is the product of necessity and pragmatism, as well as maliability and acceptability of the English language.

Oladejo (1991), contrary to Omodiagbe's submission, describes Nigerian Pidgin as 'the only truly neutral indigenous Nigerian language'. Whatever its status, it is a lingua franca in informal domains, especially among the non-western educated masses. It is also a principal language of commerce which has been creolized in Sapele, Warri and other areas of Delta and River states of Nigeria. It is used in literary or creative writing, in mass media, in inter-ethnic communication among lower classes in some educational institutions. In urban centres like Warri, Benin City, Sapele, Port Harcourt, Onitsha and Calabar, it is spoken by over 70% of the adult population, and in these places almost all the children of school age speak pidgin fluently. It functions as a language of wider communication in public institutions, public service and welfare centres, post offices, police stations, Army barracks and Magistrate centres. In market places and commercial centres; it is equally widely spoken (Agheyisi 1984; Adebija 1992b).

3. 'Multiglossia' and Domains of Language Use in Nigeria

'Multiglossia' is a term used as an extension of Ferguson's (1959) 'diglossia' and (Adebija 2004) to describe language use situation in a multilingual environment like Nigeria. It should be stated that Fishman's (1967) is more appropriate to explain language use situation in Nigeria, where there are varieties of a language. Language potency and prestige in Nigeria are directly related to language functions. For instance, the English language is used in formal situations, in the media, in education, etc. as a result of its prestige. The functions assigned to a language or languages enhance the prestige of such languages like Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa and English. Various languages in Nigeria have distinct functional manifestations at several hierarchical levels of usage, that is, each of the languages has domains of use different from the others. They are assigned roles based on their prestige and status.

In the Nigerian situation, multilingualism is directly linked to 'diglossia'. This determines the roles and functions of a language, that is, the role a language performs within a multilingual speech community like Nigeria. Some languages may be more functionally silent in a particular context than others. A language could be used to perform certain functions based on the perception of its users, its suitability for certain occasions, participants, the intention of the communicative encounter, interpersonal goals relating to identity, solidarity, exclusion and commitment of oneself (Adebija 1987; Searle 1969; Austin 1969).

At the societal level, language functions appear to be more fixed. The functions of languages especially in multilingual contexts, such as Nigeria include roles relating to official use of language, being used as national language, media language of wider communication, international communication purposes, school subjects, judiciary functions, roles relating to national identity, solidarity and for cohesiveness of the citizens.

4. The Determining Factors of Language Domains in Nigeria

It has been discovered that in Nigeria, the following factors determine the language domains:

a. Prestige and Status

Generally speaking, a language is considered prestigious if given prestigious functions and is considered low if it is not given any function at all or allocated low status functions. In actual sense, through status planning, the status of a low language can be considerably enhanced, for example, in Nigeria, education is taken to be a high-prestige domain of language functionality. And those languages that are used as mediums of instruction in Nigeria are given high or prestigious status; this is the case with English, Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa.

b. Level of Development

Development is used here synonymously with modernization and standardization. The most basic measure of language development is graphization. Other measures include availability of dictionaries and linguistic descriptions, lexical expansion, metalanguage or register. In Nigerian multilingual society, the functions allocated to a language seem to be directly proportional to the extent of their development. For instance, Hausa, Igbo, Edo, Yoruba and Efik are offered as school subjects at the West African Examination Council and National Examination Council because they have been already developed.

c. Historical and Political Profile

According to Adegbija (2004), to a large extent, the historical and political past tradition tends to attract greater functions to a language or languages. National functions are assigned to Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, representing the languages of the three major political power blocs in Nigeria. Equally, the international functions of English in the world, is enhanced by the political power-broken dynamism of the combined force of the native speakers of the language; hence English language is allocated official functions in Nigeria.

d. Institutional Policies

Institutional policies of government ministries, organs or agencies, cultural and religious organizations, language development centres, universities and the other educational institutions and the media within the country contribute remarkably to the determination of language functions. Generally, languages that receive the institutional blessings tend to prosper functionally while those that do not tend to functionally wane or wither. In Nigeria, the three elevated native languages, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, have the backing of the institutional policies of the government. And right now, some minority indigenous languages like Efik, Edo, Urhobo are also being given some institutional policy backing in their various regions.

e. Numerical Strength

The number of speakers of a language tends to contribute to its prestige and status and it affects its allotted functions. The national function allocated to Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba is traceable to the number of their speakers. Languages with a small population of speakers in Nigeria are functionally underrated, oppressed and belittled (Jibril 1990). Certainly, the most noticeable aspect of language use situation in Nigeria is the hierarchical distribution of functions among the different languages in the country.

The indigenous languages in Nigeria are the languages of ethnic solidarity and local day-to-day interactions. A few of them are used in broadcasting (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, Efik, Edo). They are also predominant in religious worship of various kinds. It is significant to note that as far as functions of languages in the Nigerian multilingual context is concerned, speakers modify their speech codes appropriately to fit changes of interlocutors, social setting, discourse topic, and conversational mood. The domains for the use of each of the languages in Nigeria include the institution of government, the media, commerce, schools, religion and the home.

5. The Institution of Government

In Nigeria, English is prominently used at the three tiers of government: Federal, State, and Local. But it is even more so at the national level where it is constitutionally co-official with the three major Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba in the legislative houses. In practice, owing to linguistic heterogeneity, English is the predominant language of nationalism, nation building and governmental functions. Proceedings in law courts, especially, the Supreme Court and the High Court of Justice are also predominantly conducted in the English language. Lawyers argue their cases and judges deliver their judgments largely in English.

In Sharia courts, Arabic plays a significant role since it is considered more related to Islamic justice than English, pidgin or any of the indigenous languages. Commenting on this and on the general functions of Arabic in Nigeria, Akinnaso and Ogunbiyi submit:

This relationship between Arabic and Islam underscores the predominantly religious role of Arabic in Nigeria today, especially its use in Islamic worship and qur'anic pedagogy. Beyond this religious role, however, Arabic has performed other important roles as: 1. a language documenting the pre-colonial history of what is now northern Nigeria; 2. a medium of international contract and diplomacy especially with the Arab world, 3. a medium of popular graffiti; 4. a donor language to a number of Nigerian languages, especially Hausa and Yoruba; and 5. a language of political administration. In the defunct Kanem-Bornu and pre-colonial Hausaland which formed the nucleus of much of the present northern states of Nigeria. (Akinnaso and Ogunbiyi (1991: 1)

As far the written mode is concerned, English can be said to be the predominant language at all levels of government. Consequently, government publications, newsletters, gazettes, policy documents such as the National Policy on Education, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and newsletters of ministries are normally published in English. Consequently, however, we have isolated cases in which records are kept in the indigenous languages.

6. The Media

The media is the life-blood of effective information dissemination in any nation, especially multilingual ones like Nigeria. Crucial national information dissemination in Nigeria occurs first in English, even though less than

30% of Nigerians are competent in it. But it is, at the moment, the only effective language for reaching out to the entire country. In reality, English officially serves as the paramount chief among the languages of nationalism in Nigeria; hence, national broadcasts are usually given in English language. It should be noted that the different geo-political zones broadcast in both English and zonal languages to ensure a wider coverage in their respective geographical zones.

Indisputably, English is predominant in the print media. Most of the national dailies are written in English: *The Guardians*, *The Punch*, *This day*, *The Nigerian Tribune*, *The Sun*, etc. There are other regional newspapers that are produced in the languages of the various geo-political zones in Nigeria. Examples of these local newspapers are, ALAROYE KOWE, (See Salawu 2006).

7. Commerce

Nigerian pidgin is functionally unrivalled in ethnic commercial contacts, especially in the southern states of Nigeria. This is partly because it is the language that could be most easily picked up by the masses since its history and origin are rooted in this domain. It has been perpetuated dominantly in this domain at the societal and individual levels. Thus, in many Nigerian markets, especially in the southern parts, pidgin is the predominant language of inter-ethnic transaction.

Through inter-ethnic communication tends to occur in Nigerian pidgin, but other indigenous languages are also used depending on whether or not the interlocutors share the same language. In this connection, it is important to emphasize the significant role played by the languages in most of the states as lingual-francas in inter-ethnic communication, especially in the domain of trade. So, English occupies the backseat in the commercial domain, except in big businesses such as chambers of commerce and multinational commercial contacts like banking and highly commercial activities.

8. Religion

There are three major religions in Nigeria: Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion. Islam has Arabic for prayers and reading of the Koran. And the indigenous languages are used in traditional religion. The language of Christianity vary depending on the denomination, educational status and language background of the majority of the congregation, the geographical location of the church, and, sometimes, the language background of the pastor. However, the indigenous languages are used in the traditional churches such as the Anglican and Methodist churches as well as African churches, while English is strictly used in the Pentecostal Churches such as Living Faith Mission, New Covenant Church, etc. and occasionally translated into the indigenous language of the area.

Generally, in the religious domain in Nigeria, language could function as potent weapon for cementing a spiritual bond, for identifying the faithful for enlisting members and for a spiritual course. In performing these functions, any of the three languages (exoglossic, endoglossic, or endo-exoglossic) in the country could be employed, the final choice largely depends on the sociolinguistic composition of the majority of the congregation and the geographical location of the place of worship.

9. The Home Domain

A particular language could not be said to be dominant in Nigerian homes, particularly in the southwestern part of Nigeria. The home is supposed to be a relaxed environment where there would be freedom to express oneself in the indigenous language, but the reverse seems to be the case in Nigeria. Both literate and non-literate force their children to speak English and discard the indigenous languages as the languages of the uncivilized people.

Some homes in Nigeria, where husband and wife come from different language backgrounds, but are bilingual in English and in an indigenous language, English tends to be predominant. However, when they are bilingual in two indigenous languages, each parent sometimes speaks his or her language to the children. The mother's language or the language of the immediate environment tends to become dominant in the children principally because most children have greater interaction and intimacy with their mothers than with their fathers.

10. Language Use According to the Audience

Despite the prevalence of English as the language of wider communication in Nigeria, it would be foolhardy for a young person to speak in English in a normal jocular circumstance with an elderly person. It is considered a form of disrespect, rudeness and misconstrued value. Speaking the mother tongue serves as a polite technique. Therefore, in circumstances like this, a larger percentage of the Nigerian populace would prefer using their mother tongue. Schmeid (1985) and Sure (1991) opine that "the greater the age and the higher the cultural and social status attained by an addresser, the greater the need a speaker feels to employ politeness strategies. "In this

circumstance, what counts as politeness strategies in interpersonal interactions in most Nigerian communities is better expressed by the very fact of speaking the mother tongue”.

11. Phatic Solidarity and Boundaries Markers

Language choice is used to suggest either familiarity or solidarity or as a mark of divergence. This is exemplified in a situation in which a student converses with his/her lecturer in their shared mother tongue after the class. Also, in an elder-junior relationship, the junior would rather greet the elderly in the mother tongue in place of English so as not to be considered rude. The English language has no room for elaborate greeting system which is found in many indigenous languages. Language choice here may also be used to dissociate oneself from the ethnic loyalty.

Language choice, with regards to the family, occurs when in a multilingual family, the mother tongue is reverted to (in a case where the language of the environment is different from the language spoken at home). Although the language spoken in the larger society is thought to be more prestigious, the members of the family prefer to use their own language. This is to show familiarity, intimacy and closeness. However, when they are with other members of the community, they converse in the more prestigious language.

Language choice varies according to the different domains of use; this implies that language varies according to situations as well as the relationship that exists between the various interlocutors. It suggests that interlocutors switch from one language to another, which is what Blom and Gumperz (1972) and Gumperz (1982) identified as metaphorical code switching. Metaphorical code switching is most likely to be motivated by the topic or according to the issues being discussed.

12. Summary

Linguistic diversity in Nigeria has occasioned the development of the concepts of bilingualism and multilingualism. Some people in the country speak at least one language in addition to their mother tongues; some speak as many as four. Wolf (2000:316) cites in UNESCO document prepared for the Intergovernmental Conference on Language Policies in Africa, in which it is noted that in the Nigerian case, the situation is such that:

... the number of languages spoken by each of the subjects of the speech communities studied range from two to five as follows: 60 per cent of the subjects spoke two languages; 30 per cent three; and 10 per cent over four languages.

With regards to Nigeria, it has been noticed that language choice permeates the nation vis-à-vis the people's everyday life. Nigerians, because of their colonial background, have had to add the English language to their linguistic inventory, or else, a majority of the citizenry would be excluded from day-to-day official matters. The English language is the dominating language which has firmly entrenched its roots into Nigerian life..

13. Conclusion

It is true that Nigeria is a multilingual society with diverse cultures and languages. The language use situation in Nigeria is clear despite the number of languages in the country. Each domain of language use is known for its unique language use features, although there could be deviations in some situations. Various languages: the major indigenous languages, foreign languages and minority languages have distinct use domains. It has been observed that due to the co-existence of these languages, some linguistic phenomena are unavoidable. Nigeria seems to be a giant in every sphere of life which includes the complexity of her languages, so, this uniqueness of the county as it affects her languages in all domains of their use can not be over-emphasized.

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