

# ***The Need, the Costs and Choice of a National Language in Nigeria***

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## **ABSTRACT**

*One of the national problems in Nigeria that has been defying resolution is the issue of national language. This work, therefore, takes a critical look into the whole saga. The concept of national language is extensively examined. Efforts made by different groups and governments towards adopting or choosing a language are equally examined and some of the reasons why such efforts failed are also identified. Ditto the reasons why a national language is needed in Nigeria. Attempt is made to identify and discuss the costs implication of choosing or adopting a national language for Nigeria on the part of the government, ethnic groups and individuals. Based on some identified reasons, the work concluded that English Language should be adopted as a national language in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** *National Language, need, costs, choice, Nigeria*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Nigeria's centenarian experience has proved to be myriads of hopes and aspirations. Some of these have been achieved; some remain stalemate, while the quests for others are still ongoing. For instance, a lot has been achieved in the field of education-establishment of so many Primary, Secondary and Tertiary institutions; production of world class professionals; academicians and scientists; provision of free universal basic education etc. Ditto the health sector where so many teaching hospitals, general hospitals, specialist hospitals have been provided for primary, secondary and tertiary health cares; doctors and other medical personnel are trained and hired into various medical centres etc. This is equally true of social sector where music, film, fashion and other entertaining industries are flourishing at their peak. But the same thing can hardly be said about national unity. One of the inherent objectives of 1914 amalgamation was to create a powerful nation out of multi-social and cultural diversity but the idea is gradually becoming a mirage. In Nigeria of today, nepotism and ethnic chauvinism reign supreme over patriotism and desire for national unity. Ironically, achieving unity in diversity and inculcating high sense of patriotism in the minds of citizens are always the top most priority of nearly all the regimes that the nation has witnessed. Unfortunately, none of them could boast of remarkable achievement in this respect. One of the major factors that might have been responsible for their failure in this regard is the absence of national language. Thus, the issue of national language can be

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regarded as a social bug seriously eating the fabric of Nigeria's national unity and development. However, for posterity sake, this social bug must not be allowed to continue to exist. Something must be done to put a stop to it. The objective of this paper, therefore, is to discuss the need for a national language in Nigeria and how the feat can be achieved.

### **The Need for National Language**

National language has been variously defined and it is pertinent to consider some of these definitions here to situate the entire write-up in a meaningful context. The concept, "national language" is defined as "a language (or language variant i.e. dialect) which has some connection-de facto or de jure-with a people and perhaps by extension the territory they occupy" (<http://en.Wikipedia.Org/NationalLanguage>). This definition is not only vague but equally inadequate. A language may be connected with a people or territory and yet not used or adopted as national language. For example, Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo are languages in Nigeria. They all met the conditions in the above definition. Yet, none of them is adopted or used as a national language in the country. Brann (1994) gives four quite distinctive meanings to the concept of national language especially as relates to Africa. His explanations go thus:

- i. Territorial Language of a particular people (chtonolect)
- ii. Regional language (Choralect)
- iii. Language-in-common or community language used throughout a country (demolect)
- iv. Central language used by government and perhaps having a symbolic value (Politolect)

Like the first definition, the explanation on each of the meanings given by Brann is not explicit enough. For one thing, not all territorial or regional languages are adopted in a country. Another meaning of national language according to an Online source is that "a National Language may for instance represent the national identity of a nation or country" (<http://en.Wikipedia.Org/NationalLanguage>). "National Language may alternatively be designation given to one or more languages spoken as first language in the territory of a country" This explanation is quite appropriate because national language is truly a mere designation in a country where the first or the mother tongue is adopted as the national language. However, Akindele and Adeggbite (1999) provide comprehensive information on the meaning of the term "National Language".

*A national language refers to a language which has the authority of the government conferred on it as the language of a number of ethnic groups in a given geo socio-political area. It is deliberately chosen as a symbol of oneness and unity and of achievement of independence in an erstwhile colonial situation and of the state of nationhood. Such a language must, as a matter of necessity, cut across the entire strata of the society in its use and application, e.g. the English in England, Canada and USA. It can also be qualified as a language that is both elite and mass oriented integrating everybody in the political community.*

The above information is quite comprehensive, appropriate and adequate about the meaning, the function and the official status of any language that may be regarded as a national

language. National language, therefore, is the one that is used, in addition to other roles and functions, to perform all the functions of nationalism, the language that a people of geo socio-political area regard as the language of their fatherland. There has been no tracking record of serious attempt towards adopting a national language for Nigeria since independence. This may not be unconnected with the linguistic plurality and cultural diversity of the country as well as lack of trust among the numerous ethnic groups that constitute the country. Because of this reasons, successive government in the country has been evading decisive policy on national language even the military administrations. The noticeable attempt in this regard could be found in the National Policy on Education (2004). Thus National Policy on Education was the first official document where roles were assigned to English and indigenous languages. English language was designated as language of education from upper primary to tertiary institutions while indigenous language was approved as the medium of instruction in the lower primary. Another similar attempt was made by a group of people who believed that a national language must be formed for the country by combining sounds and structures and lexical items from the three main languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Frantic efforts were made towards selling the idea to the entire citizenry of the country. One of the legacies of this group was the concept of WAZOBIA. Unfortunately, the agenda like its predecessors could not stand the trials of the embers of a nation whose unity is in diversity. Thus, the experiment was short lived.

The question may arise as to why clamouring for national language when the nation has existed for a century without it and when many countries are doing without any. The answer is very simple. Adopting a national language is necessary because of certain advantages inherent in having one as a nation. One of such advantages is the ability of a national language to foster unity. With a national language, the nation, in spite of the degree of diversity, will have a common tongue and speak with one voice. Under that condition, every citizen has high sense of belonging and hence sees other citizens as brothers though tribe and tongue may differ. This no doubt will heighten the spirit of oneness and thus enhances collective responsibility and collaborative efforts towards national unity.

Another similar advantage of adopting a national language for a country is embedded in its power to inculcate high sense of patriotism in citizens. If every citizen associates him/herself with a language, any message or information passed through such a language will be received with a glad heart. In addition, all clarion calls to national functions are answered with unparalleled enthusiasm and unalloyed willingness to serve the nation with faithfulness, loyalty and honesty, and equally ready to defend the integrity of the country with the last drop of his/her blood. The added advantage of national language is the fact that it can facilitate speedy national development. All round national development thrives well in a society that is devoid of rancours and crises. One of the ways to measure peaceful co-existence is the presence of unity with the practical demonstration of high sense of patriotism in the citizens of a country. As discussed in the previous paragraphs, means of achieving this harmonious living among different ethnics groups is inherent in adopting a national language for a country. More so, citizens with the love of their country at heart will be willing to contribute to the progress and development of such a country. They will avoid

doing anything that can bring the repute of the country down or act that can tarnish the image of their country. If the ultimate desire of the citizens is to contribute to the national growth of such a country, definitely, the development of such a country must not only be rapid, it must equally be total. Because of the aforementioned reasons and many similar others, it is obvious that adopting a national language for a country is of tremendous benefits to the entire citizenry of such a country. Thus, one can conclude that adopting a national language for Nigeria is not only desirable, it is also necessary.

### **The Costs of Adopting National Language in Nigeria**

Adopting a national language for a cultural and linguistic complex nation like Nigeria can hardly be achieved without corresponding complex costs in terms of human and non-human resources. But in spite of its enormity, the costs will turn out to be a worthy sacrifice, if all Nigerians can endeavour to execute them. First and foremost is the shedding of individual ethnic group's identity. All the groups in the country must be ready to drop their cultural and ethnic particularity and superiority. Instead of the allegiance to the cultural and ethnic identity that is currently the order of the day; national identity that makes every citizen see him/herself first as a Nigerian before ethnic group consideration should be sincerely embraced. The pseudo belief of "hollier than", "superior than", "wiser than" among the ethnic groups must be abolished completely. Every Nigerian should see and accept others as equals regardless of their cultural and ethnic differences.

In the same vein, the government at the centre will need to come out with definite language policy. The policy so adopted must be the one that will take care of the cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of Nigeria as a country. The policy must, as a matter of compulsion, be bound on the regional or state governments. The "amodal" type of policy decision is recommended in this regard. This is because there is no feeling of unity of history, customs, values or mission traceable into a distant past of the country (Akindele and Adegbite, 1999). In addition, the government must be ready to commit large number of human and non human resources to the realization of the objective. A large number of people must be trained to implement the policy to the grassroots level and to create necessary public awareness among the entire citizenry. And there may be need to provide adequate necessary equipment to facilitate easy implementation of the policy. The provision of these resources will entail a huge financial commitment on the part of the government. On the part of the citizenry, the cost is so simple. What is required of them is genuine commitment to the process of learning the chosen language and willingness to use it freely in formal and informal contexts. The adaptation of the language in social, economic, political, religious, educational settings and interactions must be total in both inter and intra-ethnic communicative contexts. This will imply de-emphasizing the use of any other language apart from the adopted national language.

### **The Choice of National Language in Nigeria**

Although no decisive decision or concrete steps have been taken towards choosing or

adopting National Language(s) in Nigeria, yet a lot of decisions (action) have taken place on the matter (Akindele and Adegbite 1999). To Soyinka (1977), an external Pan-African language such as Swahili should be considered because it enjoys large number of speakers comparative with other African languages in general and Nigerian languages in particular. In the same way, Olagoke (1982) is of the opinion that the three major languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba be adopted as National languages in Nigeria. This is because the three languages have larger number of speakers in Nigeria. In contrary to these, some people were of the opinion that an artificial language formed from the amalgamation of elements of existing Nigerian languages such as Wazobia and Guosa be adopted as Nigerian national language (Akindele and Adegbite, 1999).

Bamigbose (1990) summarizes all these agitations when he observed that the existing proposals of national languages can be categorized into two terms: the unilingual and multilingual approaches. When the former approach contains suggestions such as the choice of pidgin English, artificial languages; English; a major indigenous language; or a minor indigenous language or an external Pan-African language, etc. the latter places emphasis on the choice of the three major languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. In fact, the agitation for national language in Nigeria is unending.

Nevertheless, none of the suggestions on the adoption or choosing of national language for Nigeria has passed without criticisms. Some of these are presented here to situate the eventual suggestion in this work as regards the choice of a national language for Nigeria in well informed academic contexts. Bamigbose (1990) is of the opinion that of the possible candidate for selection as a unilingual model, some can be dismissed out of hand. Include in this category are the Pidgin English, artificial language, any Pan-Africa language or any of the minority languages. Gani-Ikilama (1990) believes that the choice of Pidgin English for national language is not likely because its social status is low and it is equally associated with semi-literate citizens. This being so, the language is regarded as highly sub-standard and therefore held in low esteem especially among the educated elite. In case of an artificial language like Wazobia or Guosa, it is believed that such a language cannot be chosen because it is devoid of the properties of creativity and generality that are inherent in the natural language. In addition, language usage is basically conventional. Therefore, the rules guiding it usage must be formed by tacit agreement among members of a society and not by trust of a numbers of individuals (Elugbe, 1990).

Also, the choice of English Language has been rejected for nationalistic reasons and lack of any sizeable constituency (Akindele and Adegbite, 1990). Sofunke (1990) is of the view that the national language of Nigeria has to be Nigerian language which can fully express and preserve the experience and culture of Nigerians. By and large, it is obvious that no choice of national language for Nigeria can be free of criticisms. Any government willing to adopt any language must be ready to resist persuasion and criticisms since it is not possible to satisfy everybody at the same time. The government should weather the storm of criticism unweariedly and establish very strong mechanisms of implementation that will stand the test of time, logistics and saboteurs. However, what this work is out to advocate is the fact that the choice of national language is long overdue in

Nigeria. Therefore, it is high time the government of the day adopted one national language with a well defined modality for implementation. There should be well calculated steps towards doing this on the part of the government. First, the “cultivation approach” must be adopted because the approach involves the public in general and intellectual in particular (Akindele and Adegbite 1999). Second, the choice must be based on monolingual principle to avoid the concept of “Jack of all trades and master of none”. Third, the choice must equally be based on “exglossia” because choosing any Nigerian Indigenous Language will create friction and ill feelings among the numerous ethnic groups in Nigeria and it is not possible to adopt all the indigenous languages (more than 400 Languages) as our national languages.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The issue of adopting national language for Nigeria has been one of the unresolved critical issues even after a century of existence as a nation. This work has examined the concept of national language and its importance in the life of a nation. The efforts of Nigerian governments (both the past and present) towards choosing a national language were equally examined with emphasis on the reasons why Nigeria as a nation should strive to adopt a national language. The likely costs of getting one for the nation were also spelt out. Some of the possibilities open to Nigeria in the course of choosing a national language were highlighted and arguments against each of them were briefly discussed. Regardless of the obvious hindrances, this work urged Nigeria government to take decisive steps towards choosing a national language for the nation. Because of the glaring comparative advantages over others, this study advocates the choice of “exglossia” based on “cultivation principle”. This in essence strongly recommends the choice of English language as Nigerian national language. This is because none of Nigerian Indigenous languages can be chosen without inter ethnic crises. English Language has been serving as the official language as well as the language of wider communication in the country. In fact, in Nigeria, the language is serving as *lingual Franca*. Whatever may be the criticisms against it, the choice of English as Nigerian national language is one of the wisest language decisions that Nigeria as a nation can take. The wisdom in this clarion call is fully reflected in the following statement of Akindele and Adegbite (1990) and it will be used to bring the discussion on the issue to a benefiting end

*A suggestion in the line of exoglossia is to use English as the national language of Nigeria. It is argued that because English is neutral to the various ethnic groups in Nigeria, the choice of the language will avert any tension which the choice of an indigenous language might create. Also, being a developed language with a vast amount of literature, there will be less problems encountered in the implementation of the choice.*

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