

## **Multilingualism and the National Language Question: From the Position of the Government in Nigeria**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*From the Position of the government in Nigeria, this study evaluates multilingualism and the National Language Question. Nigeria is a country harbouring many nations. Nigeria's multifarious problems arise from its complexity bordering on religion, ethnicism, culture and politics. Nigeria is a multilingual country but nobody knows how many languages it has. The "minority" languages and those who speak them are looked down upon and discriminated against. Language therefore becomes a major source of conflict and violence. Government seems to shy away from this burning situation and consequently pays lip service on language matters. This paper calls on Nigerians to be conscious of the advantages we may reap from our peculiar multilingual circumstances. We have a lot of cultural potential to tap provided we are ready to explore and invest in our multilingualism. The government should appreciate our multilingualism as a veritable asset and discourage efforts to suppress our vernaculars.*

Keywords: *Multilingualism, National Language Question, languages*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Nigeria is a country comprising many nations. One of the characteristics of a pluri-ethnic community like Nigeria is that it is multilingual (Edem, 2018). The term multilingual can be used to describe a person who speaks more than two languages or a community that possesses more than two languages (Eka, 2000).

The division of Nigeria into the Northern and Southern protectorates by Lord Lugard coincided with the Christian South and Muslim North, with Hausa and Yoruba as their dominant languages. Nigeria was later divided into the Northern, Western and Eastern provinces with Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo as the "provincial languages". The creation of twelve states in 1967 brought liberty to such minority languages as Efik, Edo, Kanuri, Ijo and Ffulde which were hitherto dominated by the "major" languages.

According to Enang, Urujzian and Udoka (2013b), Nigeria is a complex country. Her religion is an amalgam of Christianity, Islam, African Traditional religion and an infiltration of various cults. Educationally, Nigeria is a meeting point of Arabic, traditional and Western philosophies. This complex situation is made even more complex by the fact that there are numerous ethnic groups dotted all over the country. Nigeria can conveniently be described as a country harboring many nations.

Politicians from the different nations of the country capitalize on this complex situation, struggling desperately for a share of the "national cake". Nigeria therefore becomes a polygamous home with many gluttonous wives sapping their husband dry.

### **Multilingualism in Nigeria**

Multilingualism is not peculiar to Nigeria (Eka, 2000; Ogunsiji, 2001) and Enang, Urujzian and Udoka, 2013b). Instances of multilingualism can be cited in Canada, Mexico, Australia, the United Kingdom, Ghana and Sierra Leone. What is peculiar in the Nigerian situation is that the number of languages spoken in the country is uncertain. Olagoke (1979) and Enang et al. (2013b) have observed that the number of languages harbors in Nigeria is not known. In Nigeria, every ethnic group has a language of its own. One is therefore tempted to accept the projection of Babajide (2001) and Enang, et al. (2013b), as close to reality. According to the author, "There are about 400 native languages in Nigeria, "out of which

*...there are recognized majors: Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa ... the three major languages are far more developed in linguistics and literature than the rest coupled with the fact that they are more widely used across the country than the rest.*

This type of insinuation on Nigeria's multilingualism is pregnant with flaws. Languages are not supposed to be "major" or "minor". Every natural language has characteristics that identify it as a language. Such characteristics constitute what is known as Universal Grammar (UG). Wardhaugh (1992), cited in Enang, Eshiet and Udoka (2013), reports the benefits of multilingualism. Here, men must marry outside their language group as the

*Communities are multilingual and no effort is made to suppress various languages. It is seen as a source of strength, for it enables the speakers of the many linguistic communities to maintain contact with one another and provides a source of suitable marriage partners.*

Moreover, what parameters does one use in measuring how "widely" a language is used? We must admit that every language is unique with peculiarities in structure and use. This has been corroborated by Oyetade (20015) who observes that languages

differ in their functions, and the degree of use or functions allotted to different languages varies (Enang et al., 2013b and Enang & Edem, 2022),

Nigeria's multilingualism is a complex one since it has been interwoven with Nigeria's ethnicism, education, religion and politics. For example, Nigerian politicians have never considered multilingualism as a natural endowment that needs exploration, exploitation and even exportation. Our politicians use their coveted positions to politicize Nigeria's multilingualism. Egbokhare (2001) has observed that

*in multilingual societies, competition for power often leads to unwholesome intervention in the normal course of change of language usage patterns through language planning and policies. Once a people occupy a dominant position, they strive hard to maintain their pre-eminence.*

The unhealthy competition for power in the Nigerian polity. This competition for domination has affected the language situation in Nigeria. Our natural endowment and multilingual potential have been stultified by selfish language planning and policies (Enang & Edem, 2022 and Enang & Utin, 2023). The situation is manipulated so that the languages are equated with particular politicians and their tribes. Since politics involves an ability to identify the enemy, most of our languages have been written off as anti-government (Enang and Urujzian, 2013a). In our peculiar tribal situation, things are never allowed to take their natural courses. There is always a morbid wish to dominate and control and this often results in conflict and violence. Edem (2005) and Enang (2017) support such dominance and control. According to the author, the power position of a people and consequently their language is sometimes not under conscious control but is determined by subtle socio-political and historical forces. Enang & Edem (2022) and Enang & Utin (2023) declared that the process is the same throughout history - whether it is the conquest of one ethnic group by another, or "subtle" manipulation of one ethnic group by another. Such manipulations breed antagonisms and conflicts.

Ethnic rivalry and tension close our eyes to the rich potential we can tap from our languages. As Igboanusi and Ohia (2001), Edem (2005) and Enang (2017) rightly observe,

*Minority languages in Nigeria are often neglected. Their speakers seem aware that their languages do not function in gaining upward social mobility. The government's national language policies in general, and minority language development in particular are often viewed with suspicion. Among speakers of the neglected minority languages, there is usually political tension and rivalry resulting from perceived educational and infrastructural under-development, and cultural and linguistic alienation.*

Minority languages are neglected. The government and those in power do nothing to perpetuate them. Speakers of such languages are manipulative and discriminated against. Language then becomes a tool for political and educational aspirations. What matters is what you speak and not who you are. Multilingualism becomes a curse and not the blessing nature intended it to be (Enang, and Urujzian, 2013a and Enang and Utin, 2023).

### **Government Language Policies**

The National Curriculum Conference (1969) gave birth to the first document on Nigerian Education - A Philosophy of Nigerian Education. As a follow-up, the government organized many workshops and conferences on training teachers in the mother tongue, English, French and other languages. The government's concern for Nigerian education is demonstrated in the National Policy on Education (NPE). This paper examines portions of the policy that relate to Nigeria's multilingualism. Section 1 of the Policy, cited in Enang & Urujzian (2013a) and Enang (2017), states that

*the government considers it in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his mother tongue. The government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (NPE 1981:9).*

If the policy intends 'major language' to mean a language spoken by many Nigerians, it would still be difficult to identify such a language or languages since Nigerians have never accepted census figures. According to Enang & Edem (2022), Nigerians often live in fear and suspicion of one another: fear of domination, manipulation and being cajoled with lies. It is alleged that in some states, the target population includes domestic animals and even trees. Apart from the population question, the issue of encouraging Nigerian children to learn another language lacks commitment from the government (Enang & Utin, 2023). The child "should" be encouraged. A committed government will first mobilize and train teachers in these languages and then post them to schools in different parts of the country.

In Section 2 of the policy, the government promises to ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community for pre-primary education (NPE, 1981:10). The provision is vague. Enang, Eshiet and Udoka (2013) and Enang and Utin (2023) opine that some communities are blessed with many languages. For example, it is possible to identify three or more languages within a kilometre distance in the Northern Cross River. Which of them would be the language of the immediate community? As Crytal (1974) observes, many languages today have been oral. Most Nigerian vernaculars are close

to this observation, as only a few have written orthographies. Moreover, many Nigerian parents are illiterate about language and child development (Edem, 2015a). A child is supposed to master the grammar of his mother tongue before he undergoes a gradual transition into another language (Edem, 2015b). Nigerian parents are excited about English and want their children to speak it by all means. It is why our kindergartens emphasize English at the expense of the mother tongue.

In 2 of the National Policy on Education cited in Enang & Edem (2022), the government has promised to develop the orthography of many more Nigerian Languages and produce textbooks in Nigerian languages (NPE, 1981). In fairness to a government that is morbidly political and is engrossed in contract matters bordering on the "dividends of democracy", these laudable aims have been swept under the carpet. Successive governments and even our representatives in the various "Houses" may be ignorant of the existence of such a policy (Enang, Eshiet & Udoka, 2013 and Enang & Urujzian, 2013a).

### **The Language Question in Nigeria**

According to Enang (2017), our peculiar multilingualism has raised complex questions. Meanwhile, Nigerians have unofficially accepted English as their official language because it plays a role in Nigerian culture. Many Nigerians are not comfortable with this development. The argument in some quarters is that despite its usefulness as an official language, English still bears the mark of colonialism and can never fully help us realize our cultural potential (Enang and Urujzian, 2013a). Edem (2005) and Enang (2017) have rightly observed that our multilingualism and multiculturalism provide great potential for richer creativity.

Another disturbing question, according to Enang (2017) cited in Enang and Utin (2023), is whether Nigeria can have a native language as her national language. Some people think that it may not be possible due to Nigerian ethnic politics and the fear of domination. Hence, it is suggested by some that Nigeria could have national languages instead of a national language. The government recognises three major languages (Enang, Eshiet and Udoka, 2013). But it raises another question of whether the major languages have been generally accepted by Nigerians. How many of these languages are being used by Nigerians, and what is the government doing to facilitate their use?

There is the question of whether the government is serious about solving Nigerian language problems. A government committed to tackling Nigerian language problems would first sponsor research to ascertain the number of languages spoken. It would keep its promise of writing the orthographies of these languages. It would keep its promise of publishing textbooks in these languages (Enang, 2020). Enang,

Eshiet and Udoka (2013), cited in Enang and Utin (2023), hold that “there is also the question of ascertaining the population of those who speak each of the numerous languages in Nigeria”. All these and more are the questions that need answers in the Nigerian multilingual situation.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper has identified Nigeria as a country harbouring many nations. Nigeria's myriad problems arise from its complexity bordering on religion, ethnicism, culture and politics. Nigeria is a multilingual country, but nobody knows how many languages it has. Nigerian politicians negatively exploit the language situation to their selfish advantage. Appointments are on tribe and tongue and not competence. The minority languages and those who speak them are looked down upon and discriminated against. Language becomes a source of conflict and violence. The government seems to shy away from this burning situation and pays lip service to language matters.

This paper, therefore, calls on Nigerians to be conscious of the advantages we may reap from our peculiar multilingual circumstances. We have a lot of cultural potential to provide and are ready to explore and invest in this situation.

Nigeria could become a tourist cynosure if we have detribalized Nigerians who would be genuinely interested in mobilizing our resources and labour to explore and tap from our rich multilingual oil wells. The much-needed unity would unfold naturally. Our multilingualism would then be a blessing and not a curse.

The government must appreciate our multilingualism as a veritable asset. We must discourage efforts to suppress our vernaculars no matter how negligible their speakers are. We must preserve the right of every language to exist and help to investigate and document them. Proper documentation of these languages will reveal appreciable differences in the phonology, lexicology, syntax, morphology and semantics. These are sources of research in this virgin land.

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