

# Major Indigenous Languages and The Origin of Foreign Languages in West Africa

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## ABSTRACT

*The thrust of this paper is that we have different languages across West Africa. Each of these West African countries has its culture which is synonymous with its language as culture and language are inseparable. On the other hand, these languages and cultures have been infiltrated by alien or foreign cultures as a result of colonialism, religious activities and trade. The infiltration of these alien or foreign cultures has brought a distortion to the originality of West African languages and cultures. In addition to the distortion of languages and cultures in West Africa are code –switching, code – mixing of languages and Pidgin English spoken in English speaking West Africa. The paper also takes a look at English speaking West Africa, French speaking West Africa and Portuguese speaking West Africa. The need to teach indigenous West African languages and dialects to run pari pasu with foreign/second/official languages in West Africa is a panacea so as to resuscitate extinction of languages and dying cultures is advocated in this paper.*

*Keywords: foreign cultures, indigenous languages, foreign languages, West Africa*

## INTRODUCTION

Multilingualism as posited by Emenanjo (1990) classifies Nigeria into decamillionaires (languages spoken by more than 10 million people), demolect millionaires (languages spoken by more than 1 million people or choralect centimils (languages spoken by more than 100, 000 people). The situation in Nigeria is a reflection of what may be obtainable in West Africa as Dada, Jibrin and Ijeoma (2008) point out that West African countries number up to fifteen countries and these include Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, Ivory – Coast, Liberia, Sierra – Leone, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Gambia, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger Republic and Mauritania. On the map by the trio however, are 16 countries if Cape Verde is included but listed as 15 countries by same authors. These sixteen countries in the West African sub-region have or speak different languages or dialects. Some of these languages and dialects have intra and inter linguistic intelligibility; of course, this is a pointer to the fact that language and culture are synonymous and inseparable. The issues at stake in this paper include major languages spoken in West Africa; language families of West African countries and foreign languages in the West African sub-region.

### **Multilingualism and Multiculturalism in West Africa**

The term “multi” connotes so many or numbered items which are more than two. Webster’s Universal Dictionary & Thesaurus (2010) defines multi as a prefix which has to do with “much” or “many”. In other words, multilingualism has to do with speaking of “much” or “many” languages by individuals. Buttressing this point Dadzie (2004) opines that:

*...people who are competent in more than two languages at various levels of competence are described as multilingual. We do have nations also that are described as multilingual if more than two languages are the official languages, e. g. Switzerland where French, German and Italian are spoken*

Dadzie’s example can also be followed up in Cameroon where French, English and major Cameroonian languages are spoken. Closest to us is Nigeria as another example where English, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba languages are widely spoken across every sphere of life – education, media, judiciary, politics, administration, business etc. Not only are these languages used across spheres of life in Nigeria but they also have standard orthographies. There are many other languages in Nigeria (as in other West African countries) which might not be regarded as major languages but also have standard orthographies.

Dadzie (2004) explains further that the class of multilingual include co-ordinate multilingual and this is the class of people who have acquired the three languages in such a way that their practices can be said to be equivalent to native speakers’ efforts in the languages. The other class as suggested by Dadzie (2004) is the compound multilingual, and this is the group of people with three or more languages “seem sourced from the same reference point”. The last class of multilingual is the subordinate (Dadzie, 2004). Dadzie (2004) says that this is the class of people who are proficient in their first language and “acquires two or more languages for various reasons”. In the same vein, Olaoye (2008) is of the view that there are three types of multilingual: mono-cultural, bi-cultural multilingual and compound multilingual. In mono-cultural multilingual, Olaoye stresses that this group of people learnt the second language for ‘purely utilitarian purposes’ while bi-cultural co-ordinate multilingual must have learnt the second language for “integrative purposes” and bi-cultural compound multilingual are people who have “learnt two second languages and two distinct cultures”. Olaoye (2008) adds that:

*Multilingualism is the term given to the linguistic situation where two or more languages co-exist within the bounds of one society or kept in constant touch by politically determined interests.*

Likewise Olaofe (2006), Eka (2006) Saleh (2007) Ngharen, Saleh and Mua’azu (2014) discuss that Nigerian, nay West African languages are among the 5687 languages in the world. This makes Nigeria and West Africa multilingual communities. Multilingualism can be summarized to mean a person or people’s ability to speak two, three or more languages competently, vast in the cultures of these languages whether the person or people are co-ordinate multilingual, compound multilingual

or subordinate multilingual. In this same line, Adeyemi (1998) as quoted by Aboyeji (2010) sees the concept of culture as derived from Latin “colere” which means to “tend” or “cultivate” or “to worship”. Aboyeji (2010) quoting UNESCO (1975) also defines culture as:

*consisting of all the materials , moral and spiritual assets, works of arts, knowledge and know how, language, ways of thoughts, forms of behaviors and store of experience accumulated with a view to building a better society meeting the needs of a constantly developing society.*

Furthermore, Azikiwe (1998) defines culture as “a way of life which is dynamic and so changes with time and space”. In the light of the above definition of culture, we can conclude that multiculturalism falls within the same line of definition; the difference being that the different cultures are as diverse as the languages and dialects are also diverse. Multiculturalism could also be seen as a conglomerate of or amalgam of different cultures of different people/backgrounds who share similar ways of lifestyles, share same values, experiences, naming of places, things, religious beliefs and practices, occupations, events, animals, people; share experiences in intra and inter linguistic intelligibility and have respect for each other.

### **Major Indigenous Languages in West Africa**

In West Africa, the major indigenous languages spoken are as follow:

<b>Nigeria:</b>	English, Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba
<b>Benin:</b>	French, Yoruba, Bariba, Fon
<b>Togo:</b>	Ewe, Tem
<b>Ghana:</b>	English, Ashanti, Fanti, Akan
<b>Senegal:</b>	French, Fulani,
<b>Guinea:</b>	French, Fulani, Mandigo
<b>Gambia:</b>	English, Serer
<b>Ivory Coast:</b>	French, Guru, Bakwe
<b>Liberia:</b>	English, Gbande, Bassa
<b>Sierra – Leone:</b>	English, Mende, Temne
<b>Guinea Bissau:</b>	Portuguese, Mandigo
<b>Mauritania:</b>	French, Trarza
<b>Mali:</b>	French, Bambara, Soninke, Fulani, Tuareg
<b>Burkina Faso:</b>	French, Songhai, Mossi
<b>Niger Republic:</b>	French, Tuareg, Hausa
<b>Cape Verde:</b>	Portuguese

**Source:** Macmillan Nigeria Social Studies Atlas (2011)

West Africa is a sub-region of diverse cultures and languages. Out of 16 countries in West Africa, French speaking countries are 9 representing 56.25%. English speaking countries 5 representing 31.25% while Portuguese speaking countries are 2 representing 12.5%. Similarly, it is assumed that the French West African speaking countries have the most distorted cultures and languages as a result of the French policy of assimilation and association which were imposed on them during the obnoxious, cruel and inhuman era of colonialism.

**French Speaking Countries in West Africa:** The following constitute French speaking countries in West Africa and their respective years of independence:

Benin Republic	1960
Togo	1960
Ivory Coast	1960
Guinea	1960
Mauritania	1960
Niger	1960
Mali	1960
Burkina Faso	1960
Senegal	1960

**Source:** Macmillan Nigeria Social Studies Atlas (2011)

**English Speaking Countries in West Africa:** These are English speaking countries in West African and their respective years of independence:

Liberia	(1847 – former U.S. colony)
Ghana	(1957)
Nigeria	(1960)
Sierra – Leone	(1961)
Gambia	(1975)

**Source:** Dada, Jibrin, Ijeoma (2006)

English speaking West Africa might not have experienced extinction of languages, dialects and cultures compared to French speaking West Africa. The reason is that the British did not impose stringent measures that brought a distortion on the cultural or linguistic psyche of the citizens.

### Portuguese Speaking Countries in West Africa

Two countries are speaking Portuguese in West Africa:

Guinea Bissau or Portuguese Guinea	(1965)
Cape Verde	(1975)

**Source:** Dada, Jibrin, Ijeoma (2006)

**Fig. 1:** Map of West Africa Showing the Three Foreign Languages Spoken



**Source:** Dada, Jibrin, Ijeoma, (2006)

## **Language Families of West African Languages**

Macmillan (2011) and Olaoye (2009) posit that most of the indigenous languages spoken in West Africa fall under the Niger – Congo language family with the exception of languages like Tuareg which falls under the Afro – Asiatic language family and Hausa/Fulani languages widely spoken along West Africa fall under the Chadic language family respectively.

## **Pidgin English in West Africa**

This is a variety of fossilized English which emanated immediately after the abolition of the brutal and inhuman trade called slave trade; and freed slaves resettled in Sierra – Leone and Liberia. This variety is spoken mainly in English speaking West Africa, especially Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra-Leone and Liberia. In Nigeria, this variety, which has no orthography, is spoken among most undergraduates and most students at the tertiary level of education. It is also spoken among contemporaries in offices. It is spoken by market men and women, school drop-outs, artisans, non educated Nigerians and West Africans. In Nigeria, it is widely spoken in the South-South, South- East and South West geo – political zones respectively. In the North Central or Middle Belt geo – political zone, it is heard spoken in Benue and Kogi States respectively. Tanko, Shamiga and Armah (2009) confirm that:

*Nigerian Pidgin is not a dialect of English but a language in its own right. Although Nigerian Pidgin exhibits very marked English influences in the vocabulary. Its grammar (that is syntax and phonology) is much akin to that of neighbouring indigenous languages.*

Only a few academics are guilty of this linguistic quagmire. Tanko, Shamiga and Armah (2009) argue that pidgin is a factor in acquiring sub-standard English because the problem is simplification arising from inaccurate acquisition of the Standard English by non-native speakers.

## **Problems of Multilingualism in West Africa**

There are problems militating against multilingualism in West Africa. These problems include:

- i Distortion of cultural values and norms.
- ii Inferiority complex experienced by West Africans speaking West African languages and dialects as a result of the infiltration of western cultures and influences.
- iii Extermination of languages and dialects as a result of contact with foreign languages and cultures.

Aboyeji (2010:73) op cit observers that :

*paradoxically, many African languages are being exterminated by their people themselves as they embrace foreign languages. It has to be recognized that we cannot express all our thoughts in another's language. It is impossible because one cannot live in one's culture and express oneself perfectly in the language*

*of another culture. Again, a casual visit to any African community proves the fact that many young adults and most youths do not want to be identified with their local languages.*

The non identification or shying away from identifying with our languages destroys our cultures and languages; and promotes western cultures. We have to brace up to the challenge, taking the bull by the horn in speaking our languages and dialects and participating in cultural festivals and practices like hunting, traditional marriages, funeral rites, payment of bride price, town/village meetings, traditional coronations etc. Except these are imbibed, the linguistic and cultural extinction may continue to deteriorate in West Africa.

### **Prospects of Multilingualism in West Africa**

Languages and dialects are natural gifts to humanity irrespective of the nation, region, race or color. There is joy and ecstasy in speaking one's dialect or language because the rules are not learnt. These dialects or languages are not learnt but acquired naturally as (Williams, 1990). Olaoye (2008) provides the following prospects of multilingualism in Nigeria and West Africa.

- i Multilingualism gives the nation/nations the opportunity to establish bi – lateral relations with the other parts of the world.
- ii It reduces financial wastage in the training and production of bilingual experts who are often attached to foreign offices.
- iii It enriches the cultural heritage of the people of the respective countries.
- iv It tends to reduce ethnocentrism and prejudice.
- v It facilitates the training and production of linguists who can be trusted with writing of orthographies of many unwritten languages.
- vi Multilingualism and multilingual education if well planned and implemented could be beneficial to the nations – West Africa.

### **Ideal Instructional Materials for Teaching Multilingualism in West Africa**

Multilingualism, if well taught using the right materials could go a long way to reduce dependence on foreign or second languages in West Africa. It would also help in reducing importation of foreign materials; there would be independence on indigenous materials for our teachers and students to use. Okwudishu (1996, 2002) examines material design for language teaching and culture to include media vis – a- vis radio, television, slides, filmstrips, motion pictures, transparencies, computers, videodiscs, posters, bulletin boards, photographs; others are textbooks, magazines, newspapers, the telephone, radio programmes, textbooks, teachers' handbooks, the language laboratory etc. Other materials not mentioned by Okwudishu (2002) could include charts of alphabets in indigenous languages, diagrams of animals and artifacts in indigenous languages etc. Even artifacts and paraphernalia from West African languages and cultures could also be used for teaching West Africa languages and dialects. This will help to bring originality in the teaching of our languages.

## CONCLUSION

Multilingualism and multiculturalism play great roles in shaping nations' destinies. This is so because language and culture are part and parcel of the people. West African languages are capable of effectively displacing or replacing foreign languages being used currently at various levels of education in West Africa. Displacement or replacement has happened in Malaysia, Indonesia where English was replaced with their respective national/indigenous languages. Same has taken place in some East African countries where English and Swahili are used pari pasu in their schools. Multilingualism and multiculturalism are endowments to the nations and peoples and should be encouraged.

- i Multilingualism and multiculturalism should be encouraged both at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education across West Africa.
- ii Cultural festivals should be organized even at the primary level annually to encourage multilingualism and multiculturalism.
- iii Multilingual competitions should be encouraged among primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education.
- iv ECOWAS should liaise with respective West African countries to encourage international cultural festivals among universities in West Africa.
- v Competitions in authoring of books in local West African orthographies among post and undergraduates in West Africa should be encouraged as well.

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