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## **Sociolinguistic Assessment of the Attempts to proffer Solution to the National Language Question in a Multilingual Nigerian Environment**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study takes a look at the multilingual posture of Nigeria in the light of the national language question. It assesses the sociolinguistic factors that had hitherto prevented attempts to proffer appropriate answers to the national language question. It addresses from a different angle the age-long Nigerian (black man) penumbra and the vexed issue of language question in Nigeria as a conglomeration of many ethnic nationalities loosely existing as a multilingual one-entity. This study keeps on bearing in mind the frustrating roles which the dense multilingualism, multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity have hitherto played against the national desire and effort to choose a national language for Nigeria. It is the intention of the researchers of this work to re-assess the existing scholarly positions and opinions of contributors on this issue in order to be in a better platform to proffer a lasting answer and draw a conclusion on the issue which will be devoid of grounds that would nurture threats to the cooperate existence of Nigeria and to the language question. This study therefore, suggests among others that a dicey matter such as the one on hand should be given a fair hearing at both the lower and the upper houses of the federation legislature.*

**Keywords:** *Multilingualism, Language, Sociolinguistic, environment*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The problem of national language is not only peculiar to Nigeria. Lehmann (1976) overtly subscribes to the fact that lingua franca is the problem of all multilingual nations. According to him, India, for example, is said to have over 800 indigenous languages, but the government has been able to tackle this problem by singling out Hindu as the only national language. This was possible probably because Indians are more tolerant politically than other countries. Other instances abound in history of some other countries

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that were neck deep in the problem of national language choice. In Tanzania, for instance, the atmosphere and the experience of the Tanzanians at that time pointed to the need for a politically conducive climate and a continued commitment by the leaders to the implementation of agreed policies. Politically, Tanzania's choice of Swahili was also influenced by its role in Tanzania's landscape.

According to Abdullaziz (1971), Swahili was the language of nationalism, the language of mobilization during the quest for political independence. He added that Swahili was also favoured because it was not associated with any single politically powerful group. Thus, after independence, the use of Swahili as a symbol of inter-ethnic unity and nationalism paved the way for its use to national glory. Finally, he added the linguistic relatedness: Swahili and Bantu languages are so closely related at all the linguistic levels, that speakers of these languages can understand one another with ease. In South West Town (Soweto), the popular musical relic "Fire in Soweto" by Sonny Okosun is obviously an artistic explanation of the nature of the crisis which resulted from the introduction of Afrikans in 1976 as a compulsory language in black schools. Again, Philippine is a multilingual nation and in 1940, it adopted Indian government's approach and imposed Tagalog on Philippine as lingua franca. This singular act brewed up social and political crises that culminated in the loss of many lives (Oloyede, 2013).

Nigeria is the creation of British colonial imperialism. The boundaries were mostly determined by colonial cartographers at the request of Lord Lugard in order to eliminate friction and to enhance administrative convenience rather than to satisfy or accommodate ethnic nationalities. This is because sequel to this period, various autonomous geographical entities were in existence with a language of their own, ideological perception of their natural environment, culture and belief systems that were peculiar to them. It was British colonial policy that has engendered a country that is obviously a conglomeration of as many languages as possible, cultural philosophies and ideological differences. Therefore, rising up at an early hour of a day to make mention of language from a list of uncounted number of languages can possibly become a mirage.

Indeed, to be more technical in this explication, it is appropriate to say that the choice of a national language is a serious linguistic/language problem which has bugged Nigeria for a very long time now considering the multilingual posture of its landmass, and British creational mistake in what it called Nigeria. This is because Nigeria is a composition of many ethnic nationalities which were squeezed together like a jig-saw puzzle in 1914 by Lord Lugard for the purpose of administrative convenience. This he did when he embarked on a merger of the erstwhile Northern, Eastern and Western

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regions and further amalgamated Northern and the Southern Protectorates of the nation states at the instance of British imperialistic designers.

The candidature of the English language (Nigerian English) has not only been suggested but it is *de facto* Nigeria's national language. However, the anti-imperialist group, as a movement which is an offshoot of a larger resistance body or call for the removal of all imperialist garb (English and other European languages) argues that English, as one of the Africa's erstwhile colonizers' languages, is still a tool of post colonialism as its usage in the stead of African languages presupposes Africa's dependence on its former overlords. For example, an African literary writer and critic, Ngugi wa Thiongo criticizes the use of English, French and other European languages by African writers. He argues that the unquestioned usage of European languages by Africans can be seen as their endorsement of Europe's perceived notion of Africa as a sub-human, uncivilized continent. He substantiates his stance by giving an analysis of how the impartation and institution of English in Kenya led to the erosion of the citizens' cultural awareness and appreciation while creating in their psyche the need to identify with foreign values. This, he says, sets them up for exploitation and cultural erasure.

For colonization to achieve its aim of controlling Africa's wealth, he continues, "it needed to control Africans' mentality, culture and sense of identity. To do this, English, French and Portuguese were forced on Africa as tools of cultural alienation. The domination of a people's language by the language of the colonizing nation was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized..." (Wa Thiongo, 1986). In sum, this school of thought argues that the use of a language associated with colonization confirms and perpetuates the subjugation of the country to ex-colonial masters, and English is one of such languages. Leith (1997) also believes that English is seen as a symbol of dominance, exploitation and brings to mind the collusion with the white masters. In similar vein, some Nigerian linguists have argued against the use of English in the capacity of a national language in Nigeria. Their reasons range from political to moral considerations. For example, Ebam (1990) holds that the choice of English as a national language in Nigeria is ill-advised because, for one, it is a foreign language spoken by only ten percent of the population. He adds that it is impossible to regard the language as politically and culturally neutral, stating as some of its negative influences the moral decadence prevalent in the Nigerian society, and the relegation of Nigerian ideas and commodities in preference for foreign ones. He cites the subject of morality as a militating factor against English.

Although Ajulo (2000) does not endorse the choice of any of the Nigerian languages as the most suitable for the national language because of its linguistically dense nature, he argues that the need to accelerate the decolonization of the mind



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makes it imperative that English be brought down from its pedestal. He advocates the translation of European literary works into Nigerian languages. In the same vein, Adegbija (1994) sees the English language as a language of imposition, which has, in Nigeria led to the under-use of indigenous languages. Thus, he questions and disapproves the use of English. For the anti-imperialists, the bottom-line is the need to shed off every form of direct and indirect European domination and exploitation, which on the other hand poses a challenge - the demand for a national language that is void of every form of post colonization (Mustapha, 2010)

Another factor that militates against the adoption of English is the staggering fact that only a very negligible percentage of the people have access to English because of the high-level of illiteracy. According to Egbokhare (2004), 50% of Nigerians are still stark illiterate with less than 20% of the people who might be thought to have had access to higher education. Consequently, the pockets of users of English dotted in some parts of the country might be difficult to rely upon as model users for the rest of the people. In fact, Babajide (2007) believes that the supposed classes of people who are literate in English are not to be counted upon when the question of accountability, integrity and probity are raised. To him, the educated Nigerians have disappointed the Nigerian public and their serving as models may be unwelcome. To many Nigerians, western education and in this case English is an instrument of exploitation (Mustapha, 2010). In summary, the anti-imperialist group opposes the candidate of English as a means of shedding off the colonial yoke. It calls for a national language that reflects an independent and the sovereign state of Nigeria. Thus Banjo (1990:18) sums up the various views thus:

*It is understandable that some of the Nigerian nationalists should look upon the English language as the symbol of colonialism. To such nationalists, the indigenous cultures could not possibly come back into their own unless the English language, together with its cultural baggage, was reduced in importance in the national scheme of things.*

In spite of the arguments against the choice of English as a national language, some researchers (Osunsanya, 2005) are still pushing for Nigerian English. It is argued that since no ethnic group in Nigerian can lay claim to English as its own, this political neutrality that it satisfies, qualifies it as the national language for the country. It has also been advanced that since the kind of English used in Nigeria is a distinct variety from the English of the colonizers (so that as a localized variety of English), it might as well be the long awaited national language that the country has been longing to have. In other words, although the variety of English used in Nigeria conforms to the rules

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governing sentence formation and the other linguistic rules of international English, it is basically a product of a process that has been called nativisation or nigerianisation (a kind of modification) that reflects unique Nigerian experiences (though not of a particular ethnic group although studies show that we do have ethnic varieties of Nigerian English such as Yoruba Nigerian English, Igbo Nigerian English, Hausa Nigerian English and the others).

At the risk of being alleged to be aiding and abetting "linguistic imperialism" in some quarters, Adedimeji (2010) states that "the incontrovertible truth about the state of the nation today, as it was yesterday, is that no indigenous language is acceptable to all Nigerians". On the other hand, the view advanced by Nida and Wonderly (1971) is prevalent till today. They, in their own contribution towards resolving this heart throbbing issue, posit that in Nigeria, there is no politically neutral language. In fact, the Division (of the country) into three major regions reflects the three language poles: Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. The political survival of Nigeria as a country would even be more seriously threatened than it is if any of these three languages were promoted by the Government as being the one national language. It is against this complicated background that the status of English language as a global language and the prerogative power of arbitration with which "the neutrality of the English language will deny any claim of ownership of national language by any of the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, let alone any other ethnic group in the country (Oloyede, 2013). This mental posture alone readily informs the entire citizenry that English is not only overqualified for selection to serve as the lingua franca but also over matured to foster national unity and facilitate national consciousness, pride and perpetration of one Nigerianism.

### **Historical trace of English Usage in Nigeria**

English Language usage in Nigeria has been traced by Alabi (1994) to "pre-Atlantic slave trade era, specifically in 1553 when some British were said to have paid what scholars have described as "very brief visits to the Nigerian coasts especially the ports of Benin and of the Old Calabar". At the initial stage, the medium of communication between the English men and the natives was a kind of English-based pidgin. Therefore, the candidature of English language in Nigeria as a language that was to be chosen and or embraced for use as a tool for communication and transaction could be said to have been purely circumstantial. This is because Nigeria is a multilingual nation. According to Eka (2000), the history of the use of English in Nigeria maybe traced to the first part of the 19th century, though English-based pidgin is known to have been in use as far back as the 16th century. That was the time of the great influx of colonizers, missionaries,



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even undisguised exploiters to the coast of West Africa. A specific instance here may be cited of Missionaries who arrived in Badagary in 1842. Eka (2000) further posits that during the period under review, it was naturally authentic that no known Nigerian could speak English acceptable to any users, whether native or nonnative; whatsoever (audience) of English. Secondly, it is an established fact that the only varieties of English for communication at that time were "Broken English", "Minimal Pidgin" and "Middle Arts" English which dominated Nigerians' daily communicative traffic. From the foregoing, it has to be agreed that English has come to Nigeria and has co-existed in Nigeria with its background languages as far back as 19th century. It follows that the number of years by which English coexisted with Nigerian indigenous languages and its consistent use in representing every Nigerian experience and situation has led to the development of prototypes which have actually identified and recognized it as a divergent variety of the world Englishes.

As would have been expected, the European imperialists to the coast of West Africa were confronted with some problems which included the difficulties of communicating with the large groups of indigenous speakers of West African languages (Eka, 2000). The first obstacle confronted by the visitors was communication barrier between the natives and the English men. Therefore, there was then a pressing need to dislodge this obstruction, hence the need to use the teaching of basic English to the locally sourced interpreters for communication, business transaction, missionary activities and for the other official functions. It could be explained from the foregoing that the cornerstone of the British introduction and use of English language in Nigeria was not based on evolution of an "accepted" English but on the emergence of a fairly communicative English largely because the traders, colonial administrators were not willing to learn the indigenous language(s). This is why English language had to be imposed and taught in order to train clerks, interpreters, stewards and messengers to help the whitemen in administrative and domestic activities. It is with this humble beginning of English language usage in Nigeria since the 16th century that has enabled it (English) to settle down, co-exist with a large corpus of uncounted background languages to this day.

### **The Multilingual Posture of Nigeria**

Some scholars believe that Nigeria is a mere geographical expression with overt cultural, social and linguistic diversity. As was seen earlier on, Nigeria as a country came into existence in 1914 following the colonial policy which arbitrarily amalgamated the then Southern and Southern Protectorates to meet their designs; a singular action that changed

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the course of the country's history forever. This act too, has engendered what is today called Nigeria, a country that is obviously a conglomeration of cultural philosophies, ideological and linguistic differences with a wave of the hand or with impunity. According to Eka (2004), it has been a difficult assignment for the linguist and the language specialist to state convincingly the exact number of languages in Nigeria... Elugbe (1990) puts the figure between 394 and 400 and states that the number of languages we indicate for Nigeria may depend on the extent to which our use of the term language is elastic... Bamgbose (1978) put the figure (in a note) at 513. One tends to be persuaded that this number (513), while still (perhaps) conservative, appeals to the reader as a possible minimum.

Other estimates place the number of languages in Nigeria at over 400. This assertion may not accurately be justifiable but Nigeria is definitely a nation which has over 250 ethno-linguistic communities characterized by multiple dialectical variations that most of the times are without mutual intelligibility. In view of this problematic language situation, Nigeria then faces complex ethnic groupings with very perplexing national linguistic problems which must be solved nationally.

In fact, in a multilingual environment like Nigeria where there is a burning desire for a national language to be chosen from one of the so called three major indigenous languages, Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba, there is an obvious reason however, that while some Nigerians (mostly from the three major language-based tribes) have advanced the need for a national language other than English, only very negligible few ever contemplate or are convinced of the need to select a language which is not their own as lingua franca for Nigeria.

### **Reasons for lack of an Answer to the Language Question**

Over the years, the cries and woes surrounding the national language question have been so pathetic. In fact, it has been a sorry-sight because in spite of all efforts or attempts to find an answer or answers to this question, it has become a kind of traditional night play in Anaang tribe in Akwa Ibom State called "the more you look at it, the less you see it". There are however, many reasons why there is a persistent lack of answer or answers to the language questions which language experts themselves, who had been on solution-finding mission over the years have tended to ignore or treated as a non-issue or non-issues. They have ignored the simple facts that:

- (i) English, apart from the role it is assigned to play officially in Nigeria, is the only language among the languages spoken and written in Nigeria that is stress-free, resistant to tribal chauvinism and its accent, cultural, religious, ideological,



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environmental milieu and their worldview variables. The experts should also have placed any other language on the same rank scale to see which of these other languages (in Nigeria) would score anything close to a pass mark to qualify it for a choice as lingua franca in a multilingual "village" like Nigeria;

- (ii) As far as members of an ethnic group seeking social and psycholinguistic uniqueness according to Giles, Bourhis and Taitor (1977) "are not prepared to deemphasize the ethnic markers in their speech idiosyncrasy by exhibiting remarkable speech divergence instead of 'convergence", answer to the language questions lingers on;
- (iii) As long as this regional speech markers continue, the expected Nigerian English variety which is at its slowest speed to gain international passport will make a choice of lingua franca from any regional Nigerian English impossible, let alone from any background language in Nigeria;
- (iv) As long as ethno-linguistic rivalry hangs on as a context in Nigeria, serving as a prompt to many ethnic groups to insist on speaking English marked by ethnosyncracies and as a way to safeguard their social identity, lingua franca, which is an answer to the age-long national language question only favours English. To further assess the validity of the reasons advanced above as factors militating against a prompt answer to the national language question, it is expedient to be precise and objectively specific that from the viewpoint of tribal affinity in Nigeria.
- (v) Of the so called three major tribes in the country, Hausa appears to be the least that attaches great importance or mount pressure on itself in speaking Standard British English. This stresses the value attached to the two factors of ethnicity and religion. At most, any normal Hausa child, man or woman does not only regard their language as a *primus inter-pares* among the Nigerian languages whereas English language, to them, is a language of Christianity and of foreigners who have come to subdue "our cultural and religious institutions".
- (vi) To a greater extent, the fact that the Hausa tribe has featured or produced more political leaders in Nigeria than any other tribe, they feel that the speaking of the Hausa dialectical or tribal English should be given more recognition among most top government officials, academics than other regional or tribal varieties. In fact, of special note on this factor is the fact that during the military regime of General Sani Abacha, for instance, there was an allegation or





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insinuation that the apex ruling council meetings were most of the times conducted in Hausa language, which the second in command (2ic), General Oladipo Diya did not understand or speak. At a time, the relationship between them became frosty. This shows the extent to which the Hausa people can go in undermining English language, even when national officialdom recognizes it as a language that does not generate suspicions of having a skeleton in one's cupboard or a 'hidden agenda' in an atmosphere where inter-ethnic relationships or transactions may affect the national cooperate existence (Adedimeji, 2012);

- (vii) Consequent upon the above, the other two tribes Yoruba and Igbo (also people) with their own languages, humiliated by the pangs of ethnolinguistic torture and communicative segregation within and outside issues of national importance, resorted to a renaissance of their ethnolinguistic/cultural identity (mother tongue). These people too can hold tight selfishly to their mother tongue, communicating for hours without a dime of English phoneme or lexeme in their speech network. That is why the moves made so far towards finding an answer to the national language have not seen the light of day;
- (viii) Apart from the above, pidgin English for a long time has been adopted as a language of inter-ethnic communication and it is a noticeable fact that pidgin English has a very high influence in the Eastern part of the country. As a result of this freedom enjoyed by the totality of the citizenry, the speaking of pidgin English is further transferred to the real English language which is already characterized by ethnic markers, lingua franca remains a mirage;
- (ix) In addition, solution seekers must not ignore the fact that ethnic influences are inevitable and inextricable from mother tongue. What ethnicity and its accompanying inconsistencies have tried to do for a long time now has been to domesticate English language for Nigerians' convenient use. It is against the above backdrop that the choice of lingua franca in Nigeria has been and will continue to be implausible and unrealizable dream because perpetration of ethnicity rather prepares ground that is in favour of English language.

### **Criteria for choosing national language**

Nida and Wonderly (1977) suggest three criteria for choosing a national language.

- One, a national language should be politically neutral (no political bias as it must not unduly favour any of the linguistic communities against the other communities in the same state).



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- Two, the language of choice should be linguistically related to other indigenous languages as this will aid its learning by non-native speakers within the country.
  - And three, the language should be spoken as a mother tongue by a substantial community of speakers who can serve as satisfactory models.

Another criterion is the symbolic one suggested by Leith (1997). According to Leith (1997), in choosing a national language, symbolism plays an important role. In fact, since a national language acts among other things, as a symbol of uniqueness and unity (Holmes, 1992) it stands to reason that an ideal national language should be symbolic. In addition to the above criteria, certain factors should be considered in the choice of a national language with particular reference to Nigeria. One of them is the language situation. Nigeria is not only one of the 37 multilingual countries in Africa with more than one dominant language (UNESCO, 1985; Bamgbose, 1991, 2000) but has a long standing colonial language heritage and policy that might be difficult to push aside. Still addressing her language situation, we have a supposed classification of its over 400 languages into majority and minority languages and its attendant problems of language dominance and language threat.

According to Bamgbose (2000) the most important problem for many countries is the existence of the so-called minority languages which in Nigeria can be formidable as evidenced by her minority languages which account for 36.4% of her total population.

Another factor is language attitude towards the existing languages and the last is the objective which should transcend mere communication although a national language that has no ethnic sentiment attached to it should serve the purpose of communication adequately and for national integration. In other words, the kind of function that the language will serve - national unity and integration is a major factor to reckon with.

However, it is argued that Nigeria may find it difficult to follow the example of Tanzania and adopt Swahili. According to Abdullaziz (1971), Tanzania's language policy owes its success to various historical, political, religious and socio-cultural factors, which favoured the emergence of Kiswahili (also known as Swahili) as an acceptable national language. For example, the peculiar feature of her culture was that it assimilated the Arab-Islamic culture that came its way, as well as other regional cultures it encountered. This made it a culture everyone in the country (Tanzania) could identify with, as it had something from every culture in the country. Thus when a language of unity was needed, it only made sense to choose the language of the great tradition - Swahili (Abdullaziz, 1971).

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## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the multilingual posture of Nigeria like all other nations of the world with similar status, it is seen that the problem of language question is not a peculiar phenomenon to Nigeria. Again, experts who are still on language search for Nigeria seem to allow the artificial contraption of heterogeneous ethnic nationalities and linguistic groups to be seen as a factor cogent in any way to serve as a platform for a lingua franca to be forged out of any of the indigenous languages, hence the procrastination. Based on the well known Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis on the principles of linguistic determinism (language determines the way we think) and linguistic relativity (the distinctions encoded in one language are not available in any other language), none of the indigenous languages matches with English. Therefore, experts in language search should consider the possibility of positively recommending the English Language (for) as the lingua franca. It is in consideration of the reasons highlighted above as factors militating against the answer to the age-long national language question that this work, conscious of the various efforts made by all manners of people towards finding an answer to the national language question, still aware of the infallible contributions made by failed-proof linguistic experts who have vehemently argued that the English Language is already an entrenched language of official purposes making it a peculiar language as far as the national language question is concerned (Oloyede 2012).

In fact, the English language is believed to have stayed long in the country and has been nativized, nationalized over time that even a distinct variety of the language, which is called Nigerian English is now recognized. It is equally an agreed fact that though over the decades, English been recognized as the language of inception, exploitation, cultural alienation, political and economic neo-colonialism and linguistic imposition, one stands to agree with Jowitt (1995) cited in Oloyede (2012:4) that the demands of the present day Nigeria, which include an official language becoming a national language and a functional language, are basic in some way to its survival. The English language is swiftly gaining universal sympathy and competence mostly because the English language is gradually getting into every home which is a response to a change over which nobody has any control.

Our intention here, is not to repeat what has been published time and time again, but to further stress how qualified this most important language of the world has become outstanding in this issue, English nurtures and unites the Nigerian nation. It is the language of integration and so, is the most qualified of the all the languages spoken and written in Nigeria, to go in as a lingua franca (Adedimeji, 2004).



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