

LANGUAGE PLANNING IN A MULTI-ETHNIC STATE: THE MAJORITY/MINORITY DICHOTOMY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Language policies and planning in Nigeria have hitherto not been realistically responsive to the linguistic diversity in the country. Rather, they have succeeded in accentuating ethnic consciousness and vitality with language as a symbol. For example, Nigeria is now polarized along two linguistic lines – linguistic majority and linguistic minority. Our standpoint in this paper is that a situation such as this is inimical to our emerging democracy and our aspiration for national development. The paper, therefore, will examine language policy and planning attempts in Nigeria since independence to the present. Against the backdrop of a case study of language planning in a country like Canada, with similar linguistic problems, this paper advocates a government's strategy of governance, which allows for greater decentralization of power and which recognizes and protects the linguistic rights of all Nigerians.

Keywords: language, language policy, linguistic rights

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is widely known as a country with extreme linguistic fragmentation. In actual fact, the present linguistic situation in the country may be understood in the context of a worldwide process of balkanization. This, according to Connor (1991: 2) is a process caused by "the almost total lack of coincidence that exists today between political and ethnic borders in the world". He points out that while there are at present thousands of ethnic groups or nations in the world, there are only 160 states. This means that thousands of ethnic groups exist as minorities within larger inclusive political states, and that emerging elites within these minority groups cannot but feel disadvantaged as they compete with members of the majority for position in the larger community. Often this competition pits ethno-nationalism, an ideological and national attachment to one's group, against patriotism, a similar attachment to one's country.

This is largely true of Nigeria. Nigeria is made up of diverse ethnic groups, the majority of which have minority status. Based on the size of the various ethno-linguistic groups in the country, it may be convenient to recognize three distinct groups. These are the three major languages, i.e. Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, each spoken by more than ten million speakers. These are followed by

languages of local importance, which are equally useful in their respective states. Languages in this category include Edo, Efik, Kanuri, Tiv, Urhobo, Fulfulde, Igala, Nupe, Ijo, Isekiri, Ebira, Annang, Gwari etc. The last category is those languages that are very small and are only useful in their respective communities. These are what some scholars regard as minority languages (Agheyisi 1984). However, for these three groups of languages, Bamgbose (1992) has suggested such terms as *major* for Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo; *minor* for languages that are prominent in each state, and *small group* languages for others so as to steer clear of the pejorative connotation associated with the term "minority" languages.

Events in Nigeria until the present in matters relating to language and other aspects of our socio-political inter-relations reflect ethnic consciousness. For instance, political party affiliation and voting patterns have been mostly along ethnic lines. In the past, census figures were contested in law courts for what is believed to be deliberate attempts to under-represent particular groups. The result of the 1973 National Census was even cancelled for the suspicion that one particular ethnic group was over-represented after a devastating civil war. In addition, there are reactionary groups, which came into existence to champion the cause of particular ethnic groups. Mention could be made of the Afenifere and the Oodu'a Peoples Congress (OPC), for the Yoruba; the Arewa and the Turaki groups for the Hausa/Fulani, the Indigbo – The Pan Igbo Cultural Association, The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra, all for the Igbo ethnic group, The Ijaw Youth Movement, Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, etc. All these came into existence to safeguard the interest of their respective ethnic groups in the intense competition between the elites for the control of the economic, political and social infrastructures of the country.

In fact, the Nigerian government has demonstrated some sensitivity to the yearnings of respective groups in the country. Thus, the Federal Character Commission was established. This is the body set up to monitor appointments into the Federal Civil Service and Parastatals, enlistment in the Armed Forces and location of infrastructures, such that there is equitable distribution of national resources among the component groups of the country. Of late, even in admission into the Secondary Schools and tertiary institutions owned by the Federal Government, Federal Character Principles are followed by special allocation to states considered to be educationally disadvantaged. However, when it comes to the utilization of the linguistic resources of the country, the minority languages are not recognized as such. This will be evident when we take a look at language planning attempts in the country.

1. LANGUAGE PLANNING IN NIGERIA

Language planning may be seen as an attempt to interfere deliberately with a language. This attempt may centre on either its status with regard to some other language or its internal condition with a view to changing that condition. Thus, the first focus of language planning can be regarded as status planning. This may be in form of legislation or policy bequeathing a certain language or its variety with a status. The second focus results in corpus planning. This is an effort to improve the structure of a language or its vocabulary to make it suitable for the new needs of its speakers.

There has not been a comprehensive language policy for Nigeria as a deliberate and planned exercise. Indeed, language planning as an organized and systematic pursuit of solutions to language problems has remained largely peripheral to the mainstream of national planning. What can be regarded as our language policy came about in the context of other more centrally defined national concerns, such as the development of a National Policy on Education and the drafting of a Constitution for the country. It is in connection with these two documents, i.e. the National Policy on Education and the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria that we can talk about language policy and planning in Nigeria.

In the various attempts at language policy and planning in Nigeria, recognition has been accorded to the major languages, and to some extent, languages of state importance, to the detriment of those in the minority category. Such overt recognition includes the provision in Section 1, paragraph 8 of the National Policy on Education (1981) that in the interest of national unity, every child should learn one of the three major languages in addition to his own. So also, it is entrenched in the 1979 Constitution in Section 51 and 91, and also repeated in Sections 55 and 97 of the 1999 Constitution that:

The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English and in Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made therefore.

The business of the House of Assembly shall be conducted in English, but the house may in addition to English conduct the business of the House in one or more other languages spoken in the State as the House may by resolution approve.

These government pronouncements with regard to the status of the three major languages have awakened the language loyalty or ethnic loyalty of Nigeria's minority language speakers. They have risen to resist what they regard as attempts to make them socially, economically and politically subservient to the speakers of the dominant languages. As Beardsmore (1980) argues that (next to religion) language loyalty overrides all other questions that impinge on Nigerian life, uniting conflicting ideologies and drawing together social classes with contradictory interests.

This has been the situation from the colonial period through the early days of Nigeria's independence till now. For instance, when a member in the National Assembly urged the House to adopt Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, the three major languages as the country's languages of education and of government business, preparatory to the emergence of one of them as the national language, the suggestion was greeted with a storm of protests. A vocal member from one of the minority areas expressed an opinion which seemed to echo the opinion of all the ethno-linguistic minorities:

As one who comes from a minority tribe, I deplore in this country, that people wish to impose their customs, their languages and even their ways of life upon the smaller tribes ... my people have a language and that language was handed down through a thousand years of tradition and custom (quoted in Iwara 1988: 13).

He later strongly recommended that English be retained as Nigeria's national language.

The recognition accorded the three principal languages in the 1979 Constitution could be said to come by military fiat. The Constitution Drafting Committee that was set up to produce the Constitution refused to recommend their adoption as legislative languages. It was left to the Federal Military Government based on a minority recommendation to amend the Draft Constitution to make provision for Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as languages of proceedings in the National Assembly in addition to English.

Furthermore, when the 1979 Constitution came up for revision, with the recommendation that "the three main languages – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba should be adopted as national languages and taught in all primary and secondary schools in the country" (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1987: 186), speakers of minority languages staged a "walk-out" and this led to a watering down of the recommendation to "Government shall promote the learning of indigenous languages" (Section 19[4]). It is surprising that up till now the Constitutional provision for the use of the three major languages in the National Assembly has not been implemented. This has been partly attributed to the abrupt interruption of democratic rule by the 1983 military take-over but more importantly to the lack of will to implement the provision arising from the circumstances in which it was enacted.

Arising from the pragmatic problems associated with the use of indigenous languages as media of instruction or as school subjects, the provision in the National Policy on Education that every Nigerian child should be encouraged to learn one of the major languages in addition to his own has not been implemented. This is supposed to be implemented at the Junior Secondary School level, but this provision is being waived in many schools. But a stronger reason for this might not be unconnected with the belief of the minority speakers that their recommendation is an imposition. Thus, non-implementation is a way to certify their opposition.

Finally, some time ago it was customary for newscasters on National Television to symbolically greet their viewers "goodnight" in the three major languages at the conclusion of the 9 o'clock news. This was fiercely opposed by speakers of minority languages and the practice was consequently abandoned. So, this has been seen as a victory for minority language speakers.

This conflict situation between the major and minority languages has persisted up till now. As we have said earlier, the speakers of the so-called minority languages are only using language as a symbol. What they really fear is political, economic and cultural domination. In the competition for national resources by all ethnic groups in the country, their fear is that they may be totally subjugated and lose out eventually.

It has been noted by Bamgbose (1992) that it will amount to exaggeration to pose the language problem in Nigeria in terms of a majority/minority dichotomy. He said that there is no justification for such a dichotomy, because due to state creation, several languages have been thrown into prominence. In addition, several of the policy measures taken in the country have been taking cognisance of languages of state importance other than the three major languages. While this may be true, the speakers of these other languages like Edo, Kanuri, Tiv, Efik, Urhobo, Fulfulde, Nupe, Igala, Ijo do not accept the position of a "second fiddle" as it were. Therefore they, just like the speakers of other smaller Nigerian languages, do demand that equal attention be accorded to their languages just as the major languages at the national level. Therefore, all other languages apart from the big three are minority languages.

The fact that this is a genuine political and linguistic problem is underscored by the attention that it has received from scholars of all persuasions, notably linguists and educationists. Their works have largely focused on the problems and prospects of the implementation of the language provisions of the 1979 Constitution and of the National Policy on Education as revised in 1981. Three major dimensions are usually focused upon: national integration, education and national development (see, for example, Bamgbose 1976, 1985, 1990; Elugbe 1985; Adeniran 1993, 1995; Oyelaran 1990; Oyetade 1992, 1993; Essien 1990; Oladejo 1991; Akinnaso 1991; Iwara 1993, etc.). These studies have invariably come up with a variety of conclusions and recommendations. For instance, some scholars have recommended the one language option for the purpose of national integration. The languages frequently recommended have been English, Hausa, Pidgin, Swahili, and even a purposefully "created" artificial language. The assumed "benefits" of each of them and the associated problems are discussed in Bamgbose (1985). Proponents of the multilingual approach have supported the elevation of either Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba or as many languages as possible to the status of National languages.

Recommendations fuelled by educational and national development considerations have tended to parallel those outlined above. Recognizing the place of English as the gateway to the cream of wider world culture, it has been recommended that it be maintained in the Nigeria's educational system. But at the same time, the indigenous languages should be accorded recognition and

consequently developed as potent instruments for national development (Banjo 1995, Emenanjo 1990, Essien 1990).

Looking at these earlier works on the majority/minority dichotomy, one major drawback has been that their conclusions or recommendations have tended to be based on comments, public opinion or both. Secondly, some of the studies in question can be shown to be attempts to pass off the subjective reactions of speakers of minority languages as a priori empirical finding. Thus, they come up with recommendations bordering on sentimental or emotional considerations. The different recommendations have tended to be informed by which part of the majority/minority divide particular writers belong to (Rufai 1977, Agheyisi 1984 and Jibril 1990). We have noted elsewhere that a way out of this seemingly intractable problem is a strong national ideology (Oyetade 1993). Language policy and planning efforts can be hinged on a well-articulated ideology and all other aspects of our national life must be in conformity with this ideology. It might therefore be expedient for us to take a brief look at those ideologies that may inform language planning in such a multilingual set up as Nigeria.

2. IDEOLOGY IN LANGUAGE PLANNING

Cobarrubias (1983) has described four typical ideologies that may motivate actual decision-making in language planning in a particular society: linguistic assimilation, linguistic pluralism, vernacularization and inter-nationalism. Linguistic assimilation is the belief that everyone, regardless of origin, should learn the dominant language of the state. This is the policy adopted in France. One can see that this obviously is a step to suppress the minority languages. A situation like this usually results in language shift and ultimately language death.

Linguistic pluralism is the recognition of more than one language. This can take different forms. Certain territories within a larger society may require more than one language to conduct its affairs. It can be complete or partial, so that all or only some aspects of life can be conducted in more than one language in that society. Examples are countries like Belgium, Singapore, South Africa and Switzerland. This, in fact, is what motivates the recommendation of the three principal languages in Nigeria. As we have seen, there is a problem of implementation. So also prominent languages in respective states have not been employed in any of these States' Houses of Assembly.

Vernacularization is the restoration or elaboration of an indigenous language and its adoption as official language, e.g. Hebrew in Israel and Tagalog in Philippines. Internationalization is the adoption of a non-indigenous language of wider communication either as an official language or for such purposes as education or trade. The situation in the majority of African and Asian nations illustrates this. In Nigeria, notwithstanding the tacit recognition of the three principal languages and other languages of state importance, the pre-eminent

position of English as official language, language of education, judiciary and higher commerce is unchallenged. There have been several arguments in its support as regard its role in the national life of Nigeria (see Bamgbose 1985); it is of no use repeating them here. But it must be stressed that proper language planning in a plural society as Nigeria must realistically confront the problem of ethnicity and come up with a policy that will cater for the yearnings and aspirations of all segments of the nation. This can be made possible in the context of a solid ideology that will respect the linguistic rights of all citizens of the country no matter the number of the speakers of such languages. The present situation of tolerance of the minority is unhealthy for their future survival.

At this juncture one is inclined to support Adebija (1994: 4) who puts forward a form of a socialism which emphasizes linguistic egalitarianism in multilingual African countries. In his words:

All languages in a multilingual context whether major or minor, exoglossic or endoglossic should be seen as resources that need to be effectively harnessed for the total national good and that language policies need to respect, support and encourage the mutual harmonious coexistence of all languages, no matter their origins and the political or economic power or numerical strength of their speakers.

If this kind of ideology is adopted, every citizen will have a sense of belonging and equal opportunity to participate in nation building. Minority languages are accorded recognition in some other countries. For example, in some South American countries, minority languages are used to some extent in primary education, for example Guarani in Paraguay and Quechua in Ecuador. In Friesland, in the Northern part of the Netherlands, Frisian is permitted alongside Dutch in administration (Appel and Muysken 1987). Such forms of minority language treatment are often devised for the sake of minority language maintenance.

The Canadian situation may be instructive here. The country is jointly inhabited by two major ethnic groups: the English-speaking majority and the French-speaking minority in the Province of Quebec. Because of the numerical strength of the English-speaking Canadians, employment opportunities and the entire labour market is mostly tilted in favour of the English speakers, so much so that the French-speaking Canadians were compelled to acquire ability in English suitable for effective participation in the competition for economic, political and cultural resources of the country. This was to the displeasure of the French-speaking Canadians, and it gave rise to a series of conflicts, especially in Quebec where, according to Rousseau (1993: 17) "two thirds of Quebecers speak no English". They were demanding their linguistic rights not only in their Province but also in Canada.

According to Endleman (1995), the most current chapter in this long-lasting struggle over language rights and language dominance may be said to have begun in 1968 in Saint-Leonard, a suburb of Montreal. The Catholic School Board there refused the request of its largely Italian immigrant population to

provide education for their children in the English language. These immigrants who wanted to integrate into the English-speaking community so as to share in the privileges and prestige that this community enjoyed protested the decision of the School Board. But members of the board stood their ground, for fear that the French-speaking community which formed the majority in Montreal might be over-powered numerically by their English-speaking counterparts. This was followed by a number of riots over the rights of choice of the primary language of instruction, but more importantly, this incident sparked a major reawakening on the part of French Canadian intellectuals of the importance of ethno-nationalism to the future of Quebec.

The rising discontent of French-speaking residents of Quebec as well as their willingness and their ability to resist the encroachment of the English language and culture on their lives necessitated in 1977 the passage of the popular Bill 101, the Charter of the French language. This bill gave equal status to French and English in Canada, and especially in Quebec it is regarded as the official language. The salient issues in the Bill include the following recommendations:

1. All immigrant children, including those English-speaking children whose parents came from another Canadian province, were to be educated in French unless one of their parents had attended an English school in Quebec;
2. French is the language of work in Quebec. All private or public companies employing 50 persons or more, unless specifically exempted, were to obtain a "Francization Certificate" which asserts that their language of work is French or that the Company is applying a francization programme in order to promote the use of the French language.

In 1989, the government also passed Bill 178 commonly known as the Sign Law, which was intended to extend the government's policy of "Visage Francais" in Quebec. The Bill specified that all outdoor commercial signs must be in the French language. Indoor signs may be in both languages but those in English must be smaller and less imposing than the French signs that must accompany them. This has been the situation in Canada now, and the age-long English-speaking dominance is now gradually receding

3. LESSONS FOR NIGERIA

Even though it could be argued that the Canadian situation does not provide quite exact similarity to the situation in Nigeria, due to the status of French compared with our numerous Nigerian languages, there are important lessons to learn. There is a decentralization of power which made it possible for each province to pursue its own policies. The present Federal structure in Nigeria has encouraged the concentration of power in the central government. State governments must be allowed to have their own linguistic policies and planning strategies without prejudice to whatever recommendations that obtains at the centre. This will facilitate even development of the various state languages. In this phase of democratic governance, the military tactics of exclusion must be jettisoned for a more purposeful participatory democracy. This can be made possible when every language is considered as important and allotted definite roles in the scheme of things in every state. For example, some states broadcast in the languages of the state, and many more of such languages could still be used. Local Government administration which is very close to the people can be conducted in the languages of each Local Government area. Similarly, education up to the primary school level and depending on the stage of development, should be in the native language. Many more languages can still be taught as subjects at the junior secondary school level. Adult literacy education should also be made possible in every language in each state. This will surely make for a well-enlightened society where nobody is left out in the day-to-day affairs of government.

As is evident in the Canadian situation, the will power of the speakers of a language is an important variable in the promotion of their language. It appears that so many people have accepted the linguistic status quo in the country and do not worry about the fate of their languages. Speakers themselves have a role to play in the development of their languages. For instance, such things as stories, proverbs, cultural issues and primers may be produced, if not in the form of real books, but at least in pamphlets by the native speakers themselves. So also, everyone should be taught to take pride in his language regardless of its status. This will guarantee the continued existence of such languages. This is in line with Adegbija (1997) who recommends the establishment of national and local-development coordinating bodies, committees, or agencies to see to the development of small languages and coordinate activities that will safeguard them from being relegated to the background.

Such bodies are already in existence e.g. the Kanuri Language Board, the Ibibio Language Panel of the Akwa Esop, the Itsekiri Communal Land Trust and its Language Committee and the Nupe Language Committee. It is not, however, certain how many of these bodies are very active now. A major step must be taken to revive all those moribund ones and many more should be formed all over the country. The activities of the National Institute of Nigerian Languages, Aba, seem to be concentrated mainly on the major languages. There should be a

shift in focus and it should be made to coordinate the activities of the various language bodies in the country.

The central government equally has a big role to play. It is not enough to make policy statements without enforcing them or taking definite steps for implementation. For instance, the National Policy on Education stipulates that at the Pre-primary and Primary level, a child should be taught in his mother tongue or the language of his immediate environment. This in a way is official institutionalization of multilingualism, but this has not been practised faithfully in the country. The excuse has been that of practical difficulties of finding teachers and educational materials in some or virtually all languages. The potency of a language as a viable educational medium is better ascertained when allowed to function in this domain. Therefore, linguists and educators must be commissioned to provide educational materials in as many Nigerian languages as possible. This will certainly boost the status of many so-called minority languages and enhance their continued development.

4. CONCLUSION

We have examined language planning in Nigeria in the light of the inter-relation between the major and minority languages of the country. It is observed that the prevailing situation is that of conflict due to the subordinate position accorded to the minority or the small languages of the country. This accounts for why language policies have not been faithfully implemented. It is therefore recommended that there should be a decentralization of power, such that states and local governments should be allowed to make their own policies with regard to their languages. Thus the linguistic rights of all Nigerians will be protected.

Finally, it must be realized that with the present language policies where recognition is given to the three major languages and some languages of state importance, many minority Nigerian languages are doomed to extinction if nothing is done to safeguard them. To be sure, language is a precious resource of a people, embracing their intellectual wealth, their view of the world, their identity, their verbal art, etc. The loss of language, and by implication, the attendant cultural system it expresses, therefore means an irretrievable loss of diverse and interesting intellectual wealth, and the object of study of linguists. This must not be allowed to happen. Therefore, the government, the native speakers of the diverse languages and linguists as experts have to forge a symbiotic relationship aimed at stemming the tide of linguistic inequity and develop all Nigerian languages as potential candidates for integration and national development.

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