



Prospects and Problems of Language Policy to Indigenous Languages in Nigeria

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Abstract: *Indigenous languages in Nigeria have been relegated to the background at the expense of foreign languages. Official language policies have variously been enunciated in documents such as the National Policy on Education. Yet, there are problems facing indigenous language in Nigeria. This study examined prospects and problems of language policy to indigenous languages in Nigeria. Scholars and researchers were of the opinion that indigenous languages in Nigeria should incorporate socio-cultural activities. Problems facing the growth and development of indigenous languages were identified and prospects and possible solutions to the identified problems were proffered. It was therefore concluded that despite Nigeria is a multilingual society, there are few multilingual speakers of indigenous languages. It was however recommended that indigenous languages should be developed in order to enhance socio-cultural integration.*

Keywords: *language policy; indigenous language; multilingual society*

I. Introduction

Language is the bedrock upon which all human development is based. As human development is an endless process in the contemporary world, language has become so important that the only way to retard development is to avoid using it. Language is an integral part of culture, a reflection of many features of a given culture. Thus, like culture itself, language is a learned behaviour, which can be enhanced through direct or indirect contact. Basically, language could be indigenous or foreign depend on the way it is acquired or learnt. Although, indigenous language could be learnt rather than acquired, its status is determined by the attitude and roles in a particular speech community.

Indigenous languages in Nigeria have been relegated to the background at the expense of foreign languages (especially English). This is as a result of the quest to acquire western education in its all ramifications which has adversely influenced the roles of indigenous language and education. This paper therefore identified the prospects and problems of language policy towards indigenous languages in Nigeria. Nigeria is an independent multi-lingual African society, as well as an ex-colony of Britain. Therefore, the issue of what language of instruction should be adopted is an issue which has generated a lot of controversy. Nigeria is home to a number of about 400 languages. Most scholars such as (Elugbe 1994) and Aito (2005) concluded that about 20 per cent of Africa's more than 2,000 languages are spoken in Nigeria.

Official language policies have variously been enunciated in documents such as the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013), and the Nigerian Constitution 1999 as amended. Two other such documents testified to the attention supposedly devoted to education, unity and independence. Majority and minority languages in Africa derive their designations from numbers of speakers, literary, political or educational status. As a result of significance of language and its utilitarian values regarding communication of ideas, emotional expression, social interaction, instrument of thought and expression of identity (Adedimeji, Alabi & Abdullahi-Idiagbon, 2013). As emphasised that the world we live today is significantly different

in a number of ways from that of our fore-fathers. Literacy and development in Nigeria are thus best apprehended in the context of language planning in a multilingual society.

Policy according to Ogbonnaya (2013), serves as a blueprint for official action that impact on the general populace, example, National Policy on Education. Policy is also a plan or course of action, especially, one of an organisation or government. Policy is a course of action thought to be prudent or tactically-advantageous. It is also a deliberate plan of action to guide decisions and achieve rational outcome. Afolayan (1999) stated that there are three primary functions of language in the Nigerian education system. These include language as a mode of acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes in the educational process); language of the preservation and positive utilization of cultures and language as symbol of national unity. For this reason, language policy to indigenous languages in Nigeria is investigated with the focus on its present status, prospects, problems and possible solutions.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 Language Situation in Nigeria

Nigeria is an example of a multilingual, pluralistic and heterogeneous African state with a history of British colonization. The natural implication of these diversities is that language becomes a principal source of individual identity and a socio-political tool for interaction across different cultural and political borders. To further complicate this milieu is the colonial language bequeathed to the nation by the imperialist (Adetugbo, 1999). The fact that English is learnt in school is no longer tenable in Nigeria because both educated non-educated citizens have attracted to the notion that without English, the gate way to success in Nigeria is not realistic. Although, English is a second language in Nigeria, it is the official language at the national level. As a language of education, it is also the medium of acquiring the knowledge of western technology on which the economic development of the various parts of the country (Ayodabo, 2013).

Language policy is a starting-point in any study of the use of the mother tongue in education. Igboanusi (2016) stressed the value placed on linguistic resources in Nigeria based on English (a second language), Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (major languages) and all other indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria (minority languages). English is the official language of the country used as a medium of instruction from primary to tertiary education levels, Nigeria's major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) are taught as subjects in the school system and also serve as media of instruction up to the third year of primary education within the geographical zones in which they are used as L1.

Most of these minority languages are neither used as media of instruction nor taught as subjects in schools. In fact, the speakers of these language especially the acclaimed educated elite have negative attitude about their indigenous language because they communicate in English with their children and wards at home which eventually negate the National Language Policy at the early basic level of education. Inequality is related to natural differences, such as in several cases of languages. While some inequalities maybe desirable in order to maintain a social order, others are undesirable and may lead to uneven development. For instance, political inequality might be necessary to protect order and restrain evil (Kuper & Kuper 1996).

However, some inequalities such as linguistic inequality are undesirable and should be discouraged. Disparities, biases, discrimination, inequity and unfairness are some of the markers of every human society. Edwards (2006) clearly captures discrepancies in the way societies are

organized and has never distributed its blessings fairly or equitably. So, it is no surprise that manifestations of linguistic access and recognition have historically favoured some groups more than others (Igboanusi, 2016). To this end, Edwards (2006) stressed that only before God and the linguists are all languages equal because some languages provide more possibilities to their speakers than other languages do to their own speakers. For instance, people are more likely to have access to information and opportunities in English and French than in several other languages spoken all over the world.

As Wolf and Igboanusi (2006) and Mostafa (2019) have rightly noted, linguistic access itself is a source of inequality in several countries, particularly in most post-colonial contexts. Access to certain political positions and certain public service jobs, for example, depends on the mastery of English language in Nigeria at the detriment of their indigenous languages. Similarly, Igboanusi and Peter (2005) revealed that access to the Hausa language may attract favour to non-Hausa persons from Hausa speakers while lack of it is likely to attract discriminatory practices against the person. In the case of Yoruba, English speaker may take the advantage as the Yoruba speakers may even suffer for using Yoruba at the expense of English.

Chumbow (1990) opined that a child learns better and develops faster if he is taught in his native language. Similarly, for a child to learn basic concepts easily in order to make significant progress in life and at school, the language to use is the indigenous language. This is why the National Policy on Education, FRN (2013) encouraged the early acquisition of Nigerian languages at pre-primary school level. Jettisoning the first language as a medium of education would contribute to emotional, mental and social underdevelopment. This is because indigenous languages are of great importance in the teaching and learning of native intelligence and wisdom which are beneficial to future development in terms of curiosity, manipulative skills, spontaneous flexibility, initiative, and manual dexterity which fosters national pride, and identity (Amfani, 2009, Muritala and Muhammed, 2019).

It also preserves and promotes indigenous culture. Additionally, Fafunwa, Macaulay and Sokoya (1989) observed that children taught Mathematics and other curriculum subjects using an African language as medium of instruction over a six-year experimental period significantly outperformed their control group peers in all related aspects of the school curriculum. This is in accordance with Udoeye's (2016) observation who noted that the use of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction enhances continuity in the child's learning process and it maximises the child's intellectual development. The materialisation of the NPE represents high promises for the Nigerian populace. It is anticipated that the National Policy on Education would encourage the massive use of every language in Nigeria and thereby drastically minimise the loss of any indigenous language.

The FRN through NPE (2004) stipulated that secondary school students must be exposed to two Nigerian languages and English and French, thereby making the Nigerian children quadri-linguals: English is the medium of instruction at the secondary and university levels; French is studied as a foreign language. A situation where school system has to produce quadri-linguals continues to pose many problems. The policy was executed with vigour in the eighties: some states in northern Nigeria employed National Certificate in Education (NCE) teachers of Igbo and Yoruba to teach Igbo and Yoruba in the schools. The states in the South West and South East could not correspondingly find teachers to teach Hausa. Again, the Federal Government established Federal Government Colleges which they call "unity schools" so that bilinguals would be produced. The project failed at both Federal and State government levels (Udoeye, 2016).

Anagbogu (1999) observed that the curriculum for the teaching of the three languages at secondary school level is saddled with a lot of problems and confusion. Anagbogu (1999) showed that students learning one major and minor language do not exhibit mastery of the L2 they are taught in schools.

2.2 Empirical Studies on Language Policy to Indigenous Languages in Nigeria

Various researches have been carried out on language policy in Nigeria. Such studies include Igboanusi (2008) studied linguistic inequalities in Nigeria and minority language education, his findings identified different forms of linguistic inequalities in Nigeria resulting from natural endowment, socio-political factors and language attitude. It was also revealed the value placed on linguistic resources in English is higher than all indigenous Nigerian languages. While English is the official language of the country used as a medium of instruction from primary to tertiary education levels, Nigeria's major languages (also recognised as 'national' languages) are taught as subjects in the school system and also serve as media of instruction up to the third year of primary education within the geographical zones in which they are used as L1.

Dada (2010) who studied issues and perspectives of language policies and planning in Nigeria revealed that indigenous language users are not learning any other indigenous language in addition to their mother tongue, in spite of the multilingual language policy entrenched in the policy document. He therefore stressed that Indeed, Nigeria can be described as a nation that is very high and rich in policies but very low and deficient in implementation. Omoniyi (2012) also studied the features and functions of languages in Nigerian socio-political domains. It was concluded that Nigeria as a multilingual country with diverse languages and cultures to the extent that the total number of languages spoken is about 500 (Adegbite 2010), with the linguistic diversity in the country has occasioned the development and the spread of the concepts of bilingualism, multilingualism, diglossia and language choice. As a result of this diversity, it is noticed that the phenomenon of language choice has become inevitable on the language use habit of Nigerians as every domain of language use has its language features. This is because both the indigenous (major and minor) and foreign languages have distinct domains of usage.

However, despite the multilingual nature of the languages in the country, English Language is the dominant language in almost all the domains and specifically, it is used for all government functions as this is mainly due to historical, multi-ethnic and cultural nature of the country (Omoniyi, 2012). Danladi (2013) who studied language policy in Nigeria and the role of English language in the 21st century and find out that English has occupied an influential role in the formation of the national expectations and integration of the Nigerian nation through its 'official language' status. The finding also indicated that even a decade after decolonisation in Nigeria, English is continued to enjoy its primacy, especially in the formation of political and educational systems as a medium of instruction. It is however highlighted the transition from English monopoly to bilingualism in accordance with indigenous demands for language change in educational policy that could be the form in line with mother tongue languages (Danlandi, 2013).

Another study was carried by Udoe (2016) who studied the impact of the national policy on education (NPE) on multilingual proficiency in Nigeria, the research found that students performed badly in speaking particularly in indigenous languages mainly in the two major languages: Hausa and Yoruba languages. This contradicts the vision of the NPE (1977, 1986, 2004 and 2013) whose aim was to make every Nigerian Child bilingual in indigenous languages. This also affects the development of native intelligence and wisdom which are beneficial to future development in terms of curiosity, manipulative skills, spontaneous flexibility, initiative, speaking skills and manual dexterity which fosters national pride and identity (Amfani, 2009).

III. Discussion

3.1 Problems of Language Policy towards Indigenous Languages in Nigeria

Nigeria has the highest number of languages in sub-sahara Africa. According to Kame (2012), the country is the leader of linguistic diversity by the sheer number of languages. Out of the 13 countries that make up the sub-Saharan group, Nigeria has 514 languages, while Cameroon has 278, Congo DRC 215, Chad 131, Tanzania 128, Ghana 79, Cote d'Ivoire 78, Kenya 69, Burkina Faso 68, Central African Republic 71, Congo Brazzaville 62, Mali 57, Benin 54 (Kame, 2012). Despite the number of languages credited to Nigeria, Paul, Simons and Fennig (2013) opined that only 22 of the languages are institutionalised, 80 developing, 358 are vigorously undergoing changes, 20 are endangered and 42 are gradually going into extinction. According to these figures, it is expected that every Nigerian child should be bilingual.

The fact that Nigeria has the highest number of languages in West Africa that can be discussed from various standpoints is not in dispute but having an indigenous language that will serve a role of language unification is really an issue. However, despite government and individual efforts to plan and allocate distinct roles to each of these languages in well-stated domains, the phenomena of borrowing, interference, code-switching, code-mixing, nativisation of foreign languages, particularly, the English language are still a hindrance (Omoniyi, 2012). These phenomena are products of language contact, co-existence of both foreign and indigenous in the Nigerian multilingual environment. Speakers of English or other foreign languages (Arabic, French) and indigenous languages tend to switch from one to the other because of the existence of these languages in their linguistic repertoires.

People encounter various forms of disadvantage in their use of language. For example, children whose languages are not the media of instruction in schools are both disadvantaged and marginalised in the learning process, with the obvious consequence of not learning properly or not succeeding as much as they ought to, especially at the initial stage of learning (Batibo, 2006). Speakers of minority languages suffer several linguistic and cultural disadvantages. Several past studies such as Phillipson (2000) have attempted to address the issues of inequalities in language use by drawing attention to the need for improved rights for lesser-used languages. Of course, the issue of linguistic rights exists because of the problem of inequality in societies (Blommaert, 2004).

Igboanusi (2016) further stressed that Nigeria is rich in both linguistic and cultural resources, but these resources are unevenly exploited and developed. Some languages enjoy more spread than others. This is a natural inequality, which results from the population of the speakers of such languages among several other factors. The languages so endowed continue to serve as more prestigious resources than others; thereby creating a pattern of distribution that is largely uneven (Igboanusi & Peter 2005). It is observed that contacts between indigenous languages and cultures have greater potential for enhancing harmonious inter-language and inter-cultural communication. Such contracts also result in increase in the level of multilingualism and multiculturalism. For instance, Ebira and Ogori-Magongo people are put in the same political administrative constituency, and this increased the level of contact among them (Omoniyi, 2012).

3.2 Prospects of Language Policy towards Indigenous Languages in Nigeria

It has been discovered that in Nigeria, the following factors determine the prospects of indigenous languages:

- a. **Prestige and Status:** Generally speaking, a language is considered prestigious if given a specific function. In actual sense, through status planning, the status of a low language

can be considerably enhanced, for example, in Nigeria, education is taken to be a high prestige domain of language functionality. And those languages that are used as mediums of instruction in Nigeria are given high or prestigious status; this is the case with English, Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa.

- b. Level of Development:** This is used synonymously with modernisation and standardisation (Omoniyi, 2012). The most basic measure of language development is graphisation. Other measures include availability of dictionaries and linguistic descriptions, lexical expansion, metalanguage or register. In Nigerian multilingual society, the functions allocated to a language seems to be directly proportional to the extent of their development. For instance, Hausa, Igbo, Edo, Yoruba and Efik are offered as school subjects at the West African Examination Council and National Examination Council because they have been already developed Orthographically.
- c. Historical and Political Profile:** According to Adegbija (2004), to a large extent, the historical and political past tradition tends to attract greater functions to a language or languages. National functions are assigned to Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, representing the languages of the three major political power blocs in Nigeria. Equally, the international functions of English in the world, is enhanced by the political power-broken dynamism of the combined force of the native speakers of the language; hence English language is allocated official functions in Nigeria.
- d. Institutional Policies:** Institutional policies of government ministries, organs or agencies, cultural and religious organisations, language development centres, universities and the other educational institutions and the media within the country contribute remarkably to the determination of language functions. Generally, languages that receive the institutional blessings tend to prosper functionally, while those that do not tend to functionally wane or wither. In Nigeria, the three elevated native languages, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, have the backing of the institutional policies of the government. And right now, some minority indigenous languages like Efik, Edo, Urhobo are also being given some institutional policy backing in their various regions (Omoniyi, 2012).

IV. Conclusion

Language policy in Nigeria is widely favoured English which is a foreign language at the detriment of indigenous languages. This has negatively influenced the status, roles and functions of indigenous languages in Nigeria. Nigeria is no doubt a multilingual society but majority of language speakers are monolingual and bilingual because there are no appreciable connections among the indigenous language users despite the efforts of language policy formulation. This has caused the problems facing indigenous languages especially the three major languages. It is however concluded that with prospective ideologies such as language functions, roles and prestigious, development, institutionalisation of indigenous languages, there can be a better chance of saving indigenous languages at the expense of English in the country.

Based on the opinions of scholars and researchers from the literature and conclusion of this study, the following recommendations were made to guide and uplift indigenous languages in Nigeria:

1. Strict measure should be put in place for the implementation of language policy especially at the primary school level so that at early age, learners would appreciate their indigenous languages.
2. The existing language policy should be reviewed in order to favour, develop and appreciate all the indigenous languages rather than English or any other foreign language.

3. Parents should assist the government and the school in revitalising indigenous languages by monitoring their children and wards so as to appreciate and use indigenous language for socio-cultural integration.
4. Curriculum planners and policy makers in education should review the existing language curriculum in order to cater for at least the three major indigenous languages so as to have adequate number of functional multilingual speakers in the Nigeria.
5. Frantic efforts should be made by stakeholders in enhancing the codification of indigenous languages especially in the print and media in order to save those languages that are exposing to extinction.

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