The English Language And National Integration: The Challenges of the 21st Century

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Abstract

At the close of the twentieth century and in spite of its legislated position as the 'Official Language', English has metamorphosed from the official language of education, government and business to the unproclaimed lingua franca as well as the convenient language of both official and intimate 'record keeping' and communication (Udofot, 2003). And despite protests and legislations to the contrary, it is gradually being consciously and unconsciously groomed as the possible neutral language of unity in a multi-lingual setting like Nigeria which has been 'polarized along two linguistic lines - linguistic majority and linguistic minority' (Oyetade, 2003: 105). In this paper the present role of English as a consequence of the National Language policy as contained in the National Policy on Education as well as the linguistic situation in the country viv-a-vis the government policy of the "big three" languages are examined. Projections are made about the future of English in Nigeria given the present situation of multilingualism and ethnicity as well as the challenges of the twenty-first century such as globalisation , the need for a universal language and the nativisation of English in many countries of the world.

Introduction

The language question has been a thorny and much discussed one in Nigeria. The fact that the language question has become a genuine political and linguistic problem can be seen from the attention it has received and the discussion it has generated in educational and linguistic circles. Three main areas of the language problems and prospects have been addressed: effects on education, development and national integration (See for instance Adeniran,1995, Bamgbose,1995, Essien1998, Oyetade, 1993). These studies have made various recommendations one of which is a one language option for the purpose of national integration. The languages frequently recommended have been English, Hausa, Pidgin, Swahili and even a purposely "created" artificial language' (Oyetade, 2003). Others have recommended the multilingual approach which supports the elevation of one or more Nigerian Languages to the status of National languages. However, the multi-ethnic situation in Nigeria and the consequent emotional feeling of ethnic identity and fear of marginalisation of the less populous ethnic groups have favoured the preference for English because of its neutrality, its colonial origin notwithstanding. Oyetade (2003: 107) notes that government pronouncements with regard to the status of the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) 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.

It is on record that when the 1979 Constitution was to be revised, 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) made speakers of the minority languages stage a 'walkout' and this led to a watering down of the recommendation to: 'Government shall promote the learning of indigenous languages' (Section19[4]). Up till now the constitutional provision of the three major languages in the National Assembly has not been implemented, which could be due to a lack of will to implement the provision...thus non implementation is a way to certify their opposition (Oyetade 2003:108).

English has co-existed in Nigeria with her many indigenous languages since the nineteenth century. The many years of co-existence of English with Nigerian languages and its use for expressing Nigerian experiences and situations has resulted in English developing linguistic patterns that have identified it as a distinct variety of world English. Bamgbose (1995:26) has observed for instance that 'The English Language has undergone modifications in the Nigerian environment. It has been pidginized, nativised, acculturated and twisted to express unaccustomed concepts and modes of interaction'.

Other scholars in the field of English studies in Nigeria including (Banjo 1995, 1996); Bamgbose 1995) Eka (1992, 1993), Jibril (1986), Kujore (1995), Jowitt (1991), Odumuh (1984) and Udofot (1997, 2003) also agree that the brand of English now spoken and written in Nigeria is the kind of English envisaged in Achebe (1965:216-223): 'a new English still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings'.

Nigerian English has developed in Nigeria, as has been the case in other colonies of Britain in Africa and Asia, largely through the education system although the antecedent of Nigerian English the English Based Pidgin - developed through trade (Eluqbe and Omamor 1991:11). Its phonology, lexis, semantics, syntax, pragmatics and acceptability have been variously analysed (cf Banjo 1995:203-230). Certain problems, however, face the new English in Nigeria. These are: the reluctance of the average educated Nigerian to accept Nigerianisms in English as indicating differences rather than deviant usages; the reluctance of teachers of English to accept them in teaching and examinations; the future government language policies in education and their implications for the future of Nigerian English. These problems are compounded by the fact that standard reference books of what constitutes acceptable usages in Nigerian English are yet to appear and in sufficient number to measure up with research in linguistics.

In this paper, the present role of English as a consequence of the National Language policy on language as contained in the National Policy on Education as well as the linguistic situation in the country viv-a-vis the government policy of the “big three” languages are examined. Projections are made about the future of English in Nigeria given the present situation of multilingualism and ethnicity as well as the challenges of the twenty-first century such as globalisation, the need for a universal language and the nativisation of English in many countries of the world.

The Big Three Language Policy and the Role of English

Nigeria has not had a comprehensive language policy as an organised attempt to find solutions to language problems in the country. What has emerged as a language policy came about in the context of other centrally defined national concerns such as the development of a national policy on Education and a drafting of a constitution for the country. It is in connection with 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 (Oyetade 2003:107).

Two factors, according to Platt et al (1984:199-201), determine the development and future of the new Englishes. These are: 'government language policies in general as well as educational policies in particular', and 'the attitudes which the people in the new nation have to particular policies'. In Nigeria, the National Language Policy formulated in 1977 and revised in 1981 assigns to English the role of serving as the language of instruction from the fourth year of a six-year primary course to the tertiary level. In addition, English is to be taught as a school subject right from the first year of primary education.

The 1979 Constitution Sections 51 and 91, also repeated in the 1999 Constitution Sections 55 and 97 recognise one of Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba (the languages of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria) as an additional language of official proceedings in the federal legislature in addition to English as soon as the implementation is feasible (Banjo 1996:33). To this effect, secondary school students are encouraged to learn one of these three Nigerian languages in addition to their mother tongues and English, if one of the three languages is not their mother tongue. These national policies, however, cannot be said to be fully in operation. In urban primary schools, for instance, instructions are given in English right from the first year of primary education while the switch to English in the fourth year of primary education hardly operates fully in the primary schools in the rural areas. Dolphyne (1995:28) reports a similar situation in Ghana where, like Nigeria, English is the official language. Also, the learning of another Nigerian language in addition to the mother tongue hardly operates even in Federal Government schools because of the difficulties of having teachers.

Moreover, the multi-ethnic situation in Nigeria and the consequent emotional feeling of ethnic identity and fear of marginalisation of the less populous ethnic groups have favoured the preference for English because of its neutrality, its colonial origin notwithstanding. Thus, although English is in theory and practice the official language in Nigeria, used in education, government, business, the mass media and literature, it is (unofficially) the neutral lingua franca for wider communication within and outside the country, as well as the language of letter writing and spoken communication among friends and even members of the same family when they find it convenient. This can be partly explained by the fact that many Nigerians cannot write their mother tongues while many of them in recent years, the 'Afro Saxons', (cf Mazrui 1975) speak English as their first language and can hardly speak their parents' mother tongues.

It is for these reasons that Banjo (1996:68-70) describes English in Nigeria as the language of 'record keeping' because it is used in government offices, private organisations and international transactions for keeping records of transactions and proceedings that were spoken sometimes in

an indigenous language, in the form of minutes. Recent research into the language of the open market in Uyo, the Akwa Ibom State Capital, a state where Ibioto is understood by every citizen in spite of his dialectal group revealed that 76.7% of the respondents preferred to use English for business transactions because, according to them, the use of English is better for their business (Ademuluji 1998:28-29). This research also revealed that 'there is hardly anybody in the open market that cannot speak English in whatever form (p.33). The Nigerian-Based-Pidgin is, however, not a very popular language of communication in Akwa Ibom State.

The above discussion shows that English has enjoyed a pride of place in the Nigerian society. The National Policy on Education has cultivated this prominence by recommending its being taught right from the first year of primary education. Literacy in English and/or oracy in it guarantees acceptance and success anywhere in the country. The result is that even the old woman in the remotest village in Nigeria who has never been to school can boast of a few English words and sentences.

What then is the future of English in Nigeria? What will the situation be like in the twenty-first century given the present when even the older generations who are apparently resenting the pervasive use of English by the younger generation cannot finish a sentence in their M.T. without a word of English?

English in Nigeria in the 21st century

The one century's sojourn of English in Nigeria has left indelible marks prominent among which are codemixing, codeswitching, diglossia, and permanent borrowings of English words and expressions into Nigerian languages and vice-versa. Various descriptions of these phenomena in some Nigerian languages include Bamgbose (1982) and Banjo (1986) for Yoruba; Ahukhanna (1990) for Igbo, and Essien (1993) for Ibibio. Hardly can any educated Nigerian make two sentences in any Nigerian language without English words being inserted into them, or without switching from the Nigerian language into English.

With the increased level of literacy in Nigeria and the increasing number of English users in the Nigerian society, it is anticipated that by the middle of the twenty-first century Nigerian-English may have two main varieties: the Standard Variety used by everybody, including the educated Nigerians, for communication outside official circles, and many Nonstandard varieties. The Nonstandard Varieties will likely reflect the language of the community where they flourish. The bulk of it would be intelligible to people who share the same language with the speaker and partly to other Nigerians who may not understand the code-mixed words from the Nigerian language. This brand of Nigerian English (NNE) will be slightly different from the present geographical language of Nigerian English for instance Esen's (1961) 'Efiglish' and Nwafor's (1971) Englibo, Engilhausa 'Engliyoruba' in the sense that the present geographical variations are largely attempts to render the Standard variety with mother tongue interferences on mainly the accent. The Nonstandard Nigerian English of the 21st century will not be Standard English but hybrids of English words and words from Nigerian vernaculars. They will constitute dialects rather than

accents of Nigerian English, which in time are likely to Creolise when they are spoken as first language.

The Standard Variety on the other hand may become more Nigerianised. Having been taught in the school system it will be the brand used for official purposes by all Nigerians who learn English in Nigeria. It must be noted that in spite of reactions to the contrary, Nigerian English is the brand being taught and used in secondary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria because for some decades now English teaching in most parts of the country has been done by Nigerians who were taught by other Nigerian teachers themselves. Most teachers who were taught by expatriates (mother tongue speakers of English) are now dead or retired. The point being made here is that the Nigerian (nativised) variety is now being taught in schools and used by products of the school system, and, following observable trends in language change, is likely to be sufficiently different from Standard British English to deserve the name **Ninglish**.

Given the present situation in Nigeria where two Nigerians (husband and wife) who share a common linguistic background teach their children English as a first language and communicate with each other in their mother tongue but with the child in English, not to mention a situation where two Nigerians from different linguistic backgrounds marry and use English for communication with each other and with the children, the future of English in Nigeria is assured in spite of government policies and nationalistic feelings. This means that in the next decade or two hardly may any Nigerian family use the Nigerian languages even for unofficial purposes.

The above state of affairs is perpetuated even by parents who know that English is a second language in Nigeria and should not replace the mother tongue which they would not want to exchange for Hausa, Yoruba or Igbo- the national languages. The question now is: if in the face of government policies and attempts to develop and encourage the use of the Nigerian languages (at least in the first six years of life before the learning of the second language) Nigerian babies are made to acquire English as their first language (apparently to help them do well in school and be able to communicate outside the home), is English therefore easy to replace in Nigeria in the foreseeable future?

It is easy to explain this 'prestige-laden attitudinal differential in favor of English', (Ogene 1996:21). English is not just the other language available to Nigerian bilinguals but one which guarantees social advance besides being the tool of wider communication outside one's immediate community. Besides, Nigerians recognize the status of English as an international language used widely for computer programming and the internet. It is therefore dominant over the mother tongues of most Nigerians, and as we have seen earlier, it serves as the first language for many Nigerians born in the second half of the twentieth century. This dominance of English over the mother tongues of most Nigerians is such that by the twenty-first century linguistic interference, which is now often noted in connection with the Nigerian language and English, may be examined in relation to English and Nigerian languages to the extent that English-based creoles, which are likely to replace Nigerian languages, are likely to emerge by the middle of the twenty-first century

(cf Essien 1998). Although Essien (1998) sees English Based Creoles as Nigerian languages and not English, since English merely provides the lexical items and not the structure, they will have sufficiently deviated from the Nigerian languages to deserve other names.

English as a World Language

It is undeniable that English is now an international universal language. According to Arsoba (2000). In the extent and diversity of its uses, English is matched by no other present or past language of our species. It is unparalleled in the history of the world. For the first time a language has attained the status of an international (universal) language essentially for cross cultural communication.

The British Council in its English 2000 Project made some impressive discoveries about the extent of the use of English:

- English is used in over 70 countries as an official or semi official language and has important status in over 20;
- One out of five of the world's population speak English to some level of competence. Demand from the other four fifths is increasing;
- English is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, sport, international competitions, pop music and advertising;
- Over two-thirds of the world's scientists read in English.
- Three quarters of the world's mail is written in English.
- 80% of the world's electronically stored information is in English.
- Of the estimated 40 million users of the internet, the majority communicate in English... (see Arsoba 2000)

Due to the geographical spread of English, varieties known as 'the New Englishes' have sprung up in territories once controlled or greatly influenced by the U.K. and the U.S.; for instance Afrikaans English, Cameroon English, Caribbean English, Indian English, Nigerian English, Phillipine English, Singaporean English; some of them actually regarded as English-based Creoles or pidgin. Crystal (1997) assesses that a total of 670 million people use English with a native or native-like command while approximately 1,200 to 1,500 million people have reasonable competence in English.

Going by the above analysis, it can be safely assumed that non natives outnumber native speakers of English. Consequently, the words of Prof. Grucza from Warsaw's Institute of Linguistics quoted in Arzoba (2000) are therefore not surprising: 'Natives say "this is our language not yours". I say

it's not true. English is not the language of American or British natives only. This is our language too'.

The view that the development of English is less and less determined not by the usage of the native speakers is supported by the compilers of The New Oxford Dictionary of English published in 1998; which is characterized by a large number of neologisms (e.g prozac, coolth, saddo, tehotchke) from different parts of the world. According to a British columnist, 'This isn't really an English dictionary. It is the first draft of a world language dictionary' (Arsoba 2000).

Since Nigeria already has a variety of English which is recognised worldwide and a population that speaks English as a first language, the natural thing is that English is fast moving from the position of an official second language to a first language of some Nigerians. As suggested in Udofot (2003) Nigerian English should be accepted as such and consciously cultivated and loaded with Nigerian words and idioms as Nigerian writers have done in literature and christened Ninglish to make it Nigerian like the North German variety of English Minglish coined from the name of the North German language Mississippi + English' (Martens 1990:261:269). This would also provide a background and an identity for its speakers, which an alien English never could. Apparently reacting to the uneasiness surrounding the attitudes to English in Nigeria as a colonial imposition Kujore (1995:376) suggested that the 'owners' of English are as many nations or regions as can validly claim to have viable varieties of the language. Nigeria is one of such nations

Summary and Conclusion

An attempt has been made in this paper to describe the place English has assumed in Nigeria at the close of the twentieth century. Its place in the twenty-first century has also been projected. Clearly, English has metamorphosed from the official language of education, business and commerce to the unproclaimed lingua franca (used for inter-ethnic communication) in Nigeria as well as the convenient language of unofficial and intimate 'record keeping' and communication. It is gradually and unconsciously being groomed by both the education system and Nigerians themselves as a possible language of unity in both multi-cultural marriages and a multilingual country.

The next National Policy on Language could go a step further and recognise what has been going on illegally by making English Nigeria's lingua franca for national integration while encouraging the development of the indigenous languages. If every state had its own language which is also taught in schools and used for the mass media, at least a good number of Nigeria's hundreds of languages will be developed.

Scholars in the field of English studies in Nigeria should also intensify efforts in the codification of aspects of Nigerian English and produce standard textbooks for use in schools as Nigerian writers (novelists and playwrights) have done to provide reference materials for teaching and examinations. This will also help to standardise certain features and usages across the country. The Standard Nigerian English or Ninglish would then be used as the official language and the lingua franca while the diatopic varieties which would have emerged are likely to replace the local languages which would be used for informal and unofficial transactions and as the language of

family and friendly interactions. This is an unfortunate situation indeed but that appears to be the handwriting on the wall. The challenge for the twenty-first century is not to allow this development to happen by chance but to be directed and controlled by an appropriate language policy along the lines suggested above.

ENDNOTES

1. Ademuluji (1998:28-29) :This was a final year project that I supervised in the 1997/98 session.
2. Crystal (1997) is quoted in Arsoba (2000).

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