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LANGUAGE POLICY IN NIGERIA

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Every country, it would seem, has its language problems. In the older nations of the world, these problems may centre round standardization, whereas in the newer nations they may simultaneously centre round standardization and the choice of a national language, with the attendant phenomena of bilingualism and/or multilingualism. In recent years, however, attention has been focused on the language problems of developing countries (cf Hymes, 1964; Spencer, 1963, 1971; Fishman, Ferguson and Das Gupta, 1968; Noss, 1967; Le Page, 1964). This is quite understandable, because, as Fishman (1968) has said, "Precisely because the developing nations are at an earlier stage in development ... the problems and processes of nationhood are more apparent in such nations and their transformations more discernible to the researcher. As a result, the developing nations ("new nations") have come to be of great interest to those sociolinguists who are interested in societal (governmental and other) impact on language-related behaviour and on language itself."

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In Nigeria today, as perhaps in every other West African country, linguists tend to concentrate their attention on the problems of language in education - the establishment of orthographies to enhance literacy and, perhaps more important, the acquisition of the official (European) language in schools. The problems of an explicitly stated national language policy have been cautiously avoided, because of the explosive political implications of such problems. But it does seem that in recent years the problems have gradually begun to be faced. The beginning of this attempt is marked by the Ford Foundation Survey (1966) which was conducted to take stock of the position of the teaching of English in Nigerian schools. The immediate result of the Report of the survey (Jacobs, 1966) was to direct attention to the shortage of equipment, inadequacy of methods and lack of coordination in the teaching of English in the country.

In an attempt to solve these particular problems, at least one question of principle emerged relating to the status of the English language in schools, for decisions had to be taken as to how soon or how late English should become the language of instruction. This in turn led to the larger question: what are pupils learning English for; for what roles should their learning of English prepare them in the life of the country? Then the educationists raised the purely educational objection to using English too soon as the medium of instruction. It was in this climate of thinking that a Consulting Report, again sponsored by the Ford Foundation, on "Selected Aspects of Primary and Secondary Schools Language Curriculum Development in Nigeria with Recommendations" appeared in 1969. The report, prepared by Majorie Lowry Shaplin and Judson T. Shaplin, lent support to the view that it would be best to defer the use of English as the medium of instruction



until the secondary stage of education. An experiment to verify this is today still going on at Ile-Ife under the auspices of the Institute of Education of the University of Ife.

Meanwhile, the general interest in curriculum development in the country had led linguists and English language teachers to seek to define the role of the English language in the national life of the country, as a prerequisite to a meaningful curriculum development in English. The definition of such a role is not as easy as it may seem. It is not that it is too difficult to ascertain the role of English in Nigeria in 1972, but that any policy based on such an examination is bound to be ad hoc until the real issue, that of the choice of a national language, is settled. The teachers of English themselves would be the first to admit that the teaching of English in Nigerian schools today is based, at worst on wrong assumptions, and at best on inspired hunches. All the newly-independent nations of Asia have found it necessary to choose a national language and then sought to give expression in their education policy to the resultant bi - or multilingualism. It is felt that sooner or later Nigeria will do the same, and this is why there is some scepticism about translating the status quo into an educational policy. But since it is not the place of a linguist to answer the political question relating to

language policy, all he can do is to offer suggestions, in the light of his understanding of the situation as it actually is.

Before attempting to do this in this paper, it is necessary first to examine the situation as it is. And we must begin by recognizing, as already stated, that there is a great dearth of statistical information on the language situation in Nigeria. The number of languages spoken in the country has been variously put between one hundred and over four hundred. While the actual figure remains unknown, the figure that one hears mentioned seems to depend on the mood of the speaker. It seems to be generally believed that the existence of numerous languages within a single country is a sure index of the backwardness of the nationals of that country. So, those who wish to underline that backwardness are happy to quote a figure well over one hundred, whilst Nigerians themselves, to prove the opposite, are generally inclined to quote a much lower figure. All that one can say with certainty at this stage is that there are many languages spoken in Nigeria.

Part of the difficulty in obtaining <sup>an</sup> exact figure arises from the difficulty in distinguishing between what are two languages and what are dialects of the same language. As Wolff (1964) has shown as a result of his studies in

Nigeria, intelligibility depends largely on inter-ethnic attitudes and therefore cannot be relied upon to show whether two linguistic media are two separate languages or dialects of the same language. It might be useful to quote two of his examples here. He explains the Nembe's claim that they and the Kalabari speak dialects of the same language (on the grounds that the Nembe find the Kalabari intelligible) as follows (Hymes, p. 442):

The Kalabari are by far the largest and economically most prosperous group in the Eastern delta. They regard the Nembe - and, for that matter, all other Ijaw speaking groups - as poor country cousins, definitely inferior to themselves. They alone, among eastern Delta groups, boast several large towns, such as Abonnema and Buguma; because of their proximity to Port Harcourt, and the shipping approaches to that harbour, they have access to much of the lively commercial activity in this area. Nembe and Brass - the two towns of the Nembe territory - have been reduced to the status of miserable fishing villages by the shifting sand-bars of the lower Niger. In other words, one might term the Kalabari an "up and coming" society, enjoying an economic boom and having access to the more profitable features of civilization, despising the backwater Nembe .... Thus, the intelligibility evidence merely seems to underscore Kalabari ascendancy. Whether the Kalabari actually do understand Nembe and merely claim lack of intelligibility for prestige reasons, is, of course, irrelevant. Linguistic communication from Nembe to Kalabari, by means of the Nembe dialect, seems to be non-existent.

The second example is that of Urhobo, a language of Bendel State, about which, says Wolff, "until recently there was general agreement that mutual intelligibility



was relatively high among all Urhobo dialects." Wolff however remarks (Hymes, p. 443):

Lately, however, speakers of Isoko have been claiming that their language is different from the rest of Urhobo, and that intelligibility between Urhobo and Isoko is not sufficient for normal linguistic communication. This claim has coincided with Isoko demands for greater political autonomy and ethnic self-sufficiency. Surprisingly enough, the speakers of the Okpe dialects - almost identical with Isoko - continue to consider themselves ethnically part of the Urhobo area and claim mutual intelligibility with the majority of Urhobo dialects.

In the light of such evidence, any determination of the exact number of languages spoken in Nigeria cannot completely escape the charge of arbitrariness. Census figures are unlikely to help either, partly because no reliable census has taken place in Nigeria for a long time, and partly because any information obtained from this source must also have inevitably been tainted by ethnic attitudes.

One cause - or perhaps even effect - of this lack of information on the exact number of languages spoken in the country is the fact that Nigeria operates in terms of "the three main languages of Nigeria", namely, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Earlier in the century, the colonial administrators had in addition sponsored Efik, but with the merging of the Efiks with the Ibos in the former Eastern Region of Nigeria, the importance of Efik in the national scheme of things has tended to decline. The choice of these former "Big Four"



languages was of course a matter of administrative convenience for the Colonial Government earlier in the century. Hausa was - and still is - the language with the largest number of native speakers in the country (about twelve million speakers). There was therefore a natural desire on the part of the colonial administrators to develop it into a lingua franca for the whole of Northern Nigeria. This desire was clearly translated into a language policy for that part of the country, for the Annual Report on the Education Departments for 1934 states that in Northern Nigeria, the language of instruction was Hausa for the most part, and that where some other language was used in the initial stages, Hausa was nearly everywhere introduced as a subject and before the end of the school year became the medium of instruction. The result today, forty years later, is that Hausa is very widely spoken in nine of Nigeria's nineteen States, namely, Sokoto, Kaduna, Kano, Gongola, Niger, Bauchi, Plateau, Borno and Kwara. In most of these States, Hausa shares the honour of being the official language in all but name with English, and a unique feature of the linguistic situation there is the large number of non-Nigerians who speak fluent Hausa - who in fact have to speak it in order to survive socially and economically.

The pattern in the old Western Region was also similar, with the result that today one hears Yoruba spoken in Benin, Warri and Sapele. But the language never occupied anything

like the strong position which Hausa has come to occupy in the northern States. The reason for this is presumably because the old North was little exposed to the Western-European type of education but was left to evolve a partly indigenous, partly-Arabic system of education. Today, there are about 10 million native speakers of Yoruba in Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Ondo, Kwara and Bendel States, and although the language is fairly widely spoken by other Nigerians (principally because of the position of Lagos) it is rare to find non-Nigerian speakers of it, since in this part of the country, English serves as the sole official language.

In the old Eastern Region, as already indicated, both Igbo and Efik were cultivated by the colonial administrators. Of all the "Big Four", Efik was the one with the smallest number of native-speakers, (about three millions today) but so important commercially were such towns as Calabar and Opobo in the early days that the colonial administrators took an interest in the language. Igbo, on the other hand, is not a coastal language, and the interest in it must have been based on the large number of its native speakers (about nine millions today). There must today be relatively few Nigerian non-native speakers of Efik. Rather, the attainment of independence in 1960 encouraged the Efiks themselves to learn Igbo - unwillingly, it would seem, for no sooner had Calabar and Ogoja provinces been included in the old Eastern Region than

a strong separatist movement was formed in those provinces. It is even rarer to find non-Nigerian speakers of either Efik or Igbo than of Yoruba.

The position then has been that the smaller languages were ignored at the national level, and no wonder then that no trouble was ever taken to find out exactly how many there were. Within the old three Regions, degree of linguistic tolerance varied. In the North, Hausa became so deeply entrenched that, given enough time, it might have "killed off" the minority languages. In the West, on the other hand, the importance of Edo had always been recognized, and Ibadan and Benin had always provided two important linguistic foci. In the East, concessions had inevitably to be made to Efik. The result is that today, the number of languages spoken in the northern States, even given the difficulties discussed earlier of identifying languages, tends to be underestimated. To the majority of southern Nigerians, in fact, there is only one language spoken in the North. At any rate, one good result of the rudimentary language policy of the colonial regime is that it has produced a situation in which the great majority of Nigerians speak, whether or not as native speakers, Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo or Efik. Any future national language policy must build on this beginning.



However, with the splitting up of the old Regions into twelve States, a new element has been introduced into the situation, and this clearly illustrates the dependence of a national language policy on the political organization of a country. Prior to 1966, the great majority of Nigerians had come to accept the idea of "the three main languages of Nigeria" - namely Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. In the North, in particular, there seemed to be no resentment whatsoever on the part of the native speakers of other languages to learning Hausa. In the West, an overwhelming majority of the inhabitants were Yoruba, and the rest, apart from a small minority of Ibos and Ijos, spoke one of the Edo group of languages. So the West operated in terms of Yoruba and Edo. The East similarly operated with Igbo and Efik. Now, the tendency is likely to be that every State will want to establish its own lingua franca, and some problems are likely to arise, because what was accepted as a minority language in one of the old Regions may now turn out to be a major language in one of the States, with its native speakers unwilling to concede the honour of the State lingua franca to any of its rivals.

There are, perhaps, not likely to be any dramatic changes in the northern States, with the exception of Kwara, where Yoruba may conceivably oust Hausa. In the south, the luckiest States are Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Ondo, Imo and Anambra.



Lagos, Ogun, Oyo and Ondo are homogeneous Yoruba States, whilst

Imo and Anambra are homogeneous Ibo States. Cross River State is almost as fortunate, for although it is not a homogeneous Efik State, Efik is already, to all intents and purposes, the lingua franca in the area. Perhaps the State with the most acute language problems is Bendel State, rightly regarded as the microcosm of the Federal Republic itself. Apart from the Edo group of languages spoken by the majority of the citizens of the State, there are at least three other languages spoken in the State, namely Igbo, Itsekiri and Ijo. These three languages in fact bear a close relationship to the major languages of six neighbouring States, namely, Imo, Anambra, Ogun, Oyo, Ondo and Rivers. The case of Itsekiri is the least understandable, for whereas the speakers of Igbo are contiguous to Anambra and Imo States and those of Ijo to Rivers State, those of Itsekiri are not in fact contiguous to the <sup>old</sup> Western State. And it is precisely because the speakers of these minority languages within Bendel State speak languages which are the lingua francas of other States (indeed, in two cases, two of the country's "three main languages") that the language problems of the State are uniquely complex. Over and above this, we must remember that not all the Edo languages are mutually intelligible.

We may now briefly examine how similar problems have been solved in other parts of the world. Commenting on the position in South-East Asia, Noss (1967, p. 26) remarks:

Every country of South-East Asia has by now adopted as its own a national language which is distinct from all other national languages .... To some extent each of these national languages is new on the international scene, having replaced or being about to replace a language of wider currency in many different situations. In some cases, one of the important new uses of the national language is in university-level education, with all that this implies in terms of increased demands upon the vocabulary of the language.

This underlines the importance attached in all newly-independent countries to the choice of a national language to replace the metropolitan language of the previous colonial governments. But unfortunately, as Fishman (1968, p. 6) has pointed out, "A widespread problem of new nations is that their political boundaries correspond rather imperfectly to any pre-existing ethnic-cultural unity". Explaining why such countries always place a high premium on a national language, Fishman goes on to say: . . .

In the absence of a common, nation-wide, ethnic and cultural identity new nations proceed to plan and create such an identity through national symbols that can lead to common mobilization and involvement above, beyond, and at the expense of pre-existing ethnic-cultural particularities. It is at this point that a national language is frequently invoked (along with a national Flag, a national ruler, a national mission, etc.) as a unifying symbol.

According to Noss (p. 27), every country of South-East Asia "faces, to a greater or lesser extent, the task of getting its chosen national language accepted by all of its own

people ... The three countries where the task is relatively easy share the feature of having a high proportion of the population as native speakers of dialects close to (or identical with) the standard language, South Viet-Nam being the outstanding example."

Every country in South-East Asia would seem to have to deal with three languages, namely the local languages, the national language and a world language, for even though it is considered desirable to have a national language which is indigenous to each country, it is still felt that some status should continue to be accorded the world language which was previously the official language. The language policy in each country would depend on the roles assigned at the national level to each of these languages, and the policy would then be reflected within the educational system of each country. The public educational policies with respect to the medium of instruction of the various South-East Asian countries as given by Nos (p. 36) are furnished in the table below:

Country	Local language	National	World
Burma	Grades 1 to 3	Grades 1 to HE	HE (i.e. higher education)
Cambodia	(minimal)	Grades 1 to 4	Grades 5 to HE
Indonesia	Grades 1 and 2	Grades 3 to HE	(Minimal)
Laos	(Minimal)	Grades 1 to 6	Grades 7 to 13
Malaysia	Grades 1 to 12	Grades 1 to 12	Grades 1 to HE
Philippines	Grades 1 to 2	(Grades 1 and 2)	Grades 3 to HE
South Viet-Nam	Grades 1 to 3	Grades 1 to HE	HE
Thailand	(minimal)	Grades 1 to HE	(minimal)



It is possible to make certain generalizations from this table. First, the tendency is for the local language to be used as the medium of education in the early years of schooling, while the world language tends to be the medium of instruction in higher education. At the same time, in all the countries except one, the national language is used as the medium of instruction from the first year of schooling, while in four of the eight countries it is also the medium of instruction in higher education.

In terms of the products of the educational system, it can be seen that the intention is to produce, in the majority of cases, a population that is bilingual, except in such cases where the local language also happens to be the national language. Since the tendency seems to be to delay the world language till quite late in the educational system, the implication is that only a minority will be able to acquire competence in the language. The table given above even shows that the world language is not the exclusive language of higher education, but rather that four of the eight countries also use the national language at this level. Indeed, the ambition of every country is to be able to use the national language throughout its educational system, and it is only the difficulties in terms of text-books and personnel at the high-education level that have restrained the more cautious countries.



We may conclude that, with the exception of Indonesia and Thailand, the language policies of the countries examined by Noss presuppose multilingualism in two indigenous languages and a world language except for those sections of the population whose local language happens to be the national language.

An explicit language policy for Nigeria will have to bear some resemblance to that described above, and will have at the same time to take account of the political peculiarities of the country. It has to be admitted that the more political units there are in the country, the more complex the national language policy has to be. The division of the country into three Regions had, as we have seen, conditioned Nigerians to think in terms of three main languages, but now with nineteen States, the country will almost certainly have to think in terms of a larger number of regional lingua francas. Already, the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, which used to broadcast in English and the three main Nigerian languages, broadcasts in English and as many as eighteen Nigerian languages.

If, as is very likely, Nigeria is to follow the pattern already set in South-East Asia, then one of the prerequisites of a lasting national language policy is the choice of a national language. It seems clear that the choice will be made from the three main languages. In

order to come to a rational decision it would be necessary to use the following criteria:

- (1) Population: how many people already speak the language as native speakers? Is there a standard variety of the language?
- (2) Acceptability: how acceptable is the language to the native speakers of other Nigerian languages? The number of non-native speakers at present would provide an index to this.
- (3) Typology: to how many other languages in the country is it related? The ease with which it can be learnt by non-native learners may depend on this.
- (4) International Standing and Cultural Considerations: this has to do with the attitude abroad to the language and the culture it embodies. This should be in consonance with the image that the country wishes to project abroad.
- (5) World-View of the language: does the world-view of the language coincide with that of the Federation? If the Federation's world-view is a socialist one, for example, there may be some difficulty in adopting a national language whose world-view is oligarchic or feudalistic.

- (6) State of development: this has to do with whether or not the language already has a standard orthography, and the extent to which the language can already express modern ideas.
- (7) Literary Status: the amount and quality of the literature (belles-lettres and otherwise) existing in the language.

None of the existing three main languages is likely to be superior to the others on every one of the points listed above, but it should be possible to find out which one, on balance, is preferable to the others. There is, however, the additional problem that it may not be easy to find a way of weighting these factors in relation to one another. There are those who feel that the population factor should override all the others, whereas there are those who feel that the most important consideration should be acceptability. In practical terms, acceptability would seem more important, for once a language is found acceptable by all, then the question of propagating it becomes a relatively easy one, whereas acceptability itself is not something that can be easily induced.

Bearing all these considerations in mind, the choice would seem to lie between Hausa and Yoruba. They are the two most widely-spoken languages in the country, and they are also both



widely spoken outside the country, though Hausa is undoubtedly the more widely spoken. On the other hand, Yoruba derives many other advantages from the fact that it is the language of Lagos, and therefore the most modernised (some would say corrupted) of the Nigerian languages. Indeed an incongruous, though not impossible, situation would arise if the country's national language happened not to be native to the capital city. This, however, need not at present be a very weighty matter, in view of the fact that it is now known that Lagos is to remain the capital of the Federation only temporarily. The location of the proposed new capital would in fact seem to strengthen the position of Hausa. Whatever is decided, it is useful to remember the distinction made by Fishman (1968, p. 43) between nationalism and nationism. The desire for a national language arises from nationalist considerations, in so far as the intention is to substitute an indigenous language for a world language as the official language of a country. But at the same time, only nationalist considerations can ensure that the wisest choice is made so that the new nation is consolidated and all the energies of its people harnessed towards the agreed national goals. Particularly in a country as large and diverse as Nigeria, the decision should not be allowed to be based on Hausa nationalism, Yoruba nationalism or Ibo nationalism.

Once the issue of the national language is settled, the other components of the national language policy have to be examined. Two other questions in particular have to be answered. The first relates to the status of the mother tongue, and the other to what is going to be the extent of regional lingua francas. The fewer these latter are, obviously, the better, from the nationalist point of view, and it would seem best to preserve the "Big Four" as far as possible. The States where this might prove difficult are Bendel - where Edo (Benin) has always been one of the country's top six languages - and Rivers; and if Edo and Ijo are added to the list this would give us six regional lingua francas. This would by no means be a perfect solution, because it would leave States like Borno and Plateau without lingua francas of Their own. But the majority of the citizens of those States do in fact already speak Hausa, and local needs can be satisfied by developing the various local languages of the State.

Most States would then operate in terms of four languages - the local language, the regional lingua franca, the national language and English. We shall now examine how this policy may be given expression within the educational system.

The language of higher education in Nigeria today is English, and there seems to be no particular anxiety to alter this state of affairs. The language of the secondary school is similarly

English. On a long-term view, it would be necessary to make some changes here, perhaps so that instruction is in the national language whilst English is taught as a subject. The languages of primary education would have to be the local mother tongue, the regional lingua franca, and the national language. Since the learning of the national language would receive enormous reinforcement outside the school, it might be a good idea to make it the medium of instruction from the ~~fourth~~ fourth year onwards. What happens in the first three years of primary school might be allowed to vary from place to place. For example, the local mother tongue could be made the medium of instruction, with the regional lingua franca and the national language brought in as subjects. On the other hand - particularly in cases where the local languages are so numerous that it would not be possible to have the first alternative - the regional lingua franca might be made the medium of instruction in the second and third years or even for all three years. In extreme cases, where the choice of a regional lingua franca might prove too contentious, it might be best for a State to adopt the national language as its regional lingua franca.

Reinforcement for the policy can be expected to come from the Press and Radio. Both of these media can do a lot for the standardization of the national language, but it is likely that



the country will find it necessary, as other countries have done, to have one English newspaper for purposes of communication with the outside world.

The national radio network too can concentrate on broadcasting in the national language, but, at least to begin with, the news and a small number of other programmes can be broadcast in the six regional lingua francas. Since the trend now is for each State to have its own broadcasting station, broadcasting in the regional lingua francas and local languages can be left to the State radio stations.

Something should be said about the future of the English language in Nigeria. At the moment, it is both the official language of the country as well as a restricted lingua franca for the educated classes. Because of its importance, there is a general tendency to use it as the medium of instruction as early as possible in the educational system. There are some schools where teaching is done in English from the first day in the primary school. In all others, as already pointed out, it becomes the medium of instruction after three or four years. The poor results being obtained have stimulated a great deal of interest in the Ife experiment, where it is hoped to show that the best method of all is to wait till the secondary school before using English as the medium of instruction. Noss (1967, p. 68) even takes a more extreme position when he says:

When unfamiliar languages are to be taught by means of language courses only, the language instruction should be delayed as long as possible, being given just before the objective for which they are designed (e.g., general instruction in a new medium) comes into play. This takes maximum advantage of both the attrition rate and the compression factor.

With the inauguration of the kind of national language policy described above, English would in effect become a foreign language in Nigeria, but a foreign language which educated Nigerians will not want to lack. For as long as is conceivable, it will be the language of higher education in part or whole, and the possession of a world language is likely to become more rather than less of an asset as time goes on. One possibility is that once the present pressure on English is slackened, the teaching of the language may actually improve. Indeed, the future position of English in Nigeria is adequately described neither by "English as a Second Language" nor "English as a Foreign Language". We need a label for the intermediate position between these two, or perhaps a re-definition of English as a Second Language to cover this situation as well.

The least stable of the components of the language policy described above are the regional lingua francas. Conceivably, these will phase out after some time, leaving only the mother tongue, the national language and English to reckon with. But these regional lingua francas have a vital role to play, at least in the transitional stage. While the national language is

taking root, they can serve as official languages in the States, and also as a means of communication between the centre and the States in national broadcasting. They do not really constitute too great an additional burden since they are also the local languages in many parts of the country, while on the other hand they will help to preserve the cultural diversity of the country. Finally, their adoption may make the choice of a national language more acceptable to the other major languages, thus hopefully preventing the kind of language riots that countries like India have witnessed.



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