

A Counter-Hegemony Discourse on the Status of English as a Foreign Language in Nigeria Multi-Linguistic Society.

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Abstract

The fate of the English language in an environment that is distinct from its L1 setting around the world has been the object of the study and debate in the last quarter of the century. This paper therefore, attempts to debunk the idea about the foreign nature of the English Language in Nigeria by arguing that it is alien and inadequate to convey the African culture and expression and on the other. It examines the position that the English language occupies in Nigeria by considering its status and functions at its ability to solve the various socio-economic issues in Nigeria.

Keywords: English Language, Socio-Economic, Panacea, Nigeria.

Introduction

English language came to the Nigerian society within the Nigeria, during the colonial days, and it is used with other indigenous languages because of its inadequacies. Thus, according to Ferguson (1966):

English is the traditional language of countries like England, the United States and Australia, as well as part of Canada. It is also an ex-colonial language in other countries, where the indigenous languages have remained strong as it is the case in Indian and in some African Nations. Here it continues to be used, but in partnership with the indigenous languages.

If the aforementioned view and those of other scholars in relation to this issue hold sway, we can unarguably admit the fact that English is foreign to Nigeria. On the contrary, Bamgbose (1983) holds a strong impression that the question of whether English is foreign or not is already a settled matter. This explains his identification of Nigerian English and its associated features. The paper will culminate in stating our position as to whether English language is foreign to Nigeria or not. But before we properly elucidate the arguments surrounding

this controversial issue, it is imperative and of course, pertinent to this discussion to explain the concept of foreign language.

What is Foreign Language?

A foreign language can be designed as the sequentially second language of a bilingual person. It could also be the second, third, fourth or even fifth language of multilingual person. It is also a language in which a bi or multi lingual person conduct only specialized activities and therefore one in which he/she has a partial linguistic facility of it's four basic skills. The language has the socio-cultural functions serving as a means of voluntarily acquiring a new international culture (Afolayan 1988).

A foreign language has its mother tongue standard variety, particularly that standard variety recognized within the formal educational system of the donor or mother tongue community as the target model of the formal community. It is the language for which the effectiveness of it functions requires of the learner/user, a knowledge of only one or two or three of its basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. This variety can also be described as performance variety in the sense that it has only restricted functional range in specific contexts such as those of tourism, commerce and other international transactions. The variety is indicative of geographical or national performance characteristics. For example, we can talk of Japanese English, Iranian English, French English, Togolese English and so on. (Akindele F. and Adegbite W. 1999).

English as a Foreign Language in Nigeria

The definition offered of a foreign language in the proceeding section, corroborates the position of some scholars who agree that English language is foreign to Nigeria. Judging from the following excerpts:

...can also be described as performance variety in the sense that it has a highly restricted functional range in specific contexts such as those of tourism, commerce, etc.

The very viable prediction that considers English as foreign emanates from a set specialized domains in which it is used. On the basis of our understanding, and without any prejudice to the above position held by some scholars, we are all aware that almost all the domains that English now pervades in Nigeria were originally alien. For instance, before the implantation of English language in Nigeria, the three major ethnic groups, namely: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, were said to be using their respective indigenous languages to conduct administrative,

judicial, political and socio-cultural activities. According to Dele Adeyanju in Lekan Oyeleye (2004:62).

...the name of the very first speaker of English in the geographical entity now known as Nigeria still remains elusive to researchers. But the genesis of this language in this country could be traced back to the earliest trade contract between the Europeans and the coastal regions of Nigeria.

The above quotation further buttresses the claim that sustains English as a foreign language. Therein, we can confidently conclude that English was brought by foreigners into the geographical entity called Nigeria, and as such should remain foreign. Similarly, a language can be considered not to be foreign when it is acquired or spoken natively in any geographical cum linguistic domain. However, the case in Nigeria is contrary to this view, in the sense that, there is no particular tribe, ethnic group or geographical entity in Nigeria that can lay claim to the ownership of English language. This presupposes that English language is a product of deliberate imposition on Nigerians by the colonialists.

An evidence of the above assertion can be found in the following excerpt from Omolewa (1975:104) in Lekan Oyeleye (2004):

...the colonial government was interested in the promotion of the English language primarily because of it's pre-occupation to train a core of clerks, accounting assistants, copyists, messengers, interpreters and telegraph probationers to assist the colonial administration.

In view of the above, we can agree on the claim that English was imposed on Nigerians as a result of historical and political expediency rather than linguistic and pragmatic necessity. It should also be noted that in spite of the belief that the colonial authorities created an impression that English was superior to the indigenous languages in Nigeria, yet the language can not adequately express some salient aspects of our culture. And we all agree on the fact that language and culture are inextricably linked. In other words, we all view language as a reflection of culture, and that the inability of English language to reflect some aspects of our culture, supports the notion of it foreign nature. In addition to that, English has a greater cultural affinity with the Western world than African societies. Furthermore, we can easily agree on the position that English is closely related to western culture from the way historical linguists classify Nigerian languages into three language families different from that to which English belongs. These language families are: Afro-Asiatic, Niger Congo, and

Nilo-Saharan. The classification of these languages, conspicuously excludes English language, which incidentally, is of the Indo European language family. Why then must we insist that English language is not foreign to Nigeria, after all, the language is regarded by many, as a painful legacy of colonial administration.

The Status and Functions of English in Nigeria

So far we have seen an array of views that recognize English language as foreign to Nigeria. However, the views posited are too subjective considering the status and functions of English language in Nigeria today. Thus, Ayo Ogunsiji in Iekan Oyeleye (2004:85), made the following assertion with regards to the status and functions of language.

The status accorded a language and the function which the language performs are closely related. Language status determines language functions just as language functions also determine language status. In fact, we can regard the relationship between language status and language functions as 'egg and chicken' relationship.

From the quotation above, the inter-relationship of language status and language functions is clearly demonstrated. Thus, the importance of English language in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized. It has, for a long time, served as a tool for our mutual co-operation by performing effectively some crucial functions. Although, the major indigenous languages of Nigeria are not totally left out in accomplishing these functions, it is obvious that English language is incontrovertibly more prominent especially in official quarters. Today, we all know that, English language has displaced indigenous languages in several domains formally dominated by them.

In the same vein, we are all living witnesses to the recognition which the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria accords English as the country's official language. We are very much sure that, if it is possible to divorce the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria from Nigeria as an entity, then it is surely possible for us to claim with alacrity, that English is foreign to Nigeria. Interestingly, one good thing about English in the Nigerian context, is its ability to allow speakers from various linguistic background the possibility to express their specific world views in the language. In this respect, English language in Nigeria often undergoes a process of nativization.

In the present day Nigeria, the level of acceptance enjoyed by English language has resulted to the emergence of several sub-varieties of the language variously called 'Nigerian Englishes'. Of course, this trait is not particularly unique to Nigeria; the English used throughout the world today can be observed to vary according to the geographical areas of its users. Invariably, it is not used exactly the same way everywhere. It is a well known socio-linguistic fact that when two or more languages and cultures come into contact, different types of socio-linguistic chemistry take place. Sometimes, a diaglossic situation may result or language shift, attrition or even language death. In some other instance, it can lead to the formation of a pidgin, a creole, or even the birth of a new language altogether. Instances of these various possibilities can be found in different contact situation around the globe.

The amalgamation of southern and northern protectorates in 1914 put Nigeria on the edge especially when we consider the national language question. Indeed the blessing that Nigeria has received from the implantation of English language is that it continues to function as the country's national second language. This might be responsible for the way most Nigerians are curious to pay any price to ensure a good command of English. Every Nigerian who feels the impact of English language is always desirous of possessing the ability to use the language. Those who do not have the means to actualize their dream of learning English sometimes feel compensated and even fulfilled learning to use Nigerian pidgin, which they consider as the closest sibling of English.

We can equally agree on the fact that English in Nigeria has become the language of government and administration at different levels. As the official language, it is used in all documentation and written communication such as letters, notices, regulations, queries, minutes and all other official records. In fact, Adegbija (1994) observes that important national events such as budget broadcast, National Day Celebrations and speeches are conducted in English. Likewise, Bamgbose (1990) has rightly noted that although Nigerian languages are often spoken in government offices, such languages are used to mark familiarity. They are not used in strictly formal situation. Most Nigerian languages except the few ones that have been committed into writing remain unwritten. Consequently, education inevitably takes place in English. In other words, English serves as the medium of instructions in schools at all levels. The ability to use English effectively places every citizen of Nigeria at an advantage in Nigerian society, which is highly competitive. In essence, success or failure in English at the secondary level of education may be decisive for educational and career prospects. Even employers of labour more often than not insist on

proficiency in English. Job opportunities exist more for English language graduates than for the graduates of Nigerian languages. If every doubting Thomas subscribes to the situation above, then there is no hiding place for those who regard English as foreign to Nigeria.

Similarly, the first newspaper reported to have been published in Nigeria hit the news stand in 1854 and was published in Yoruba language by Henry Townsend. It is not surprising however, that English language has overwhelmingly dominated the Press media in Nigeria. The most prestigious newspapers and magazines are all in English, so also, the level of passion for English newspapers supersedes that of the indigenous languages in Nigeria. Moreover, it is felt that the quality of news in Nigerian languages is much poorer since they are often perceived as mere translations from English rather than original news items. In a related development, we can as well notice a similar phenomenon in the area of literature. Although, some Nigerians have made outstanding contributions to literature in indigenous languages, the best known writers are those who have written in English. A direct implication of this is that more young Nigerian writers are attracted into literature in English rather than indigenous languages. As few writers of literature in indigenous languages have sometimes lamented their exclusion from or non invitation to international conferences involving creative writers. As a consequence of this situation, they feel discourage and unappreciated.

Actually, we are trying to create an impression that, the attitude of Nigerians to English newspapers and literature books written in English is indubitably positive. The positivity of Nigerian's attitude towards this issue, is to a grater extent, a testimony that English language can not be said to be foreign in Nigeria. We can equally argue that English is not a foreign language to Nigerians by looking at the crucial functions it performs in the judiciary, and the requirement of English language as a precondition for participation in political discourse. This of course, has to do with the technicalities of terms used in the courts, whose equivalents are rarely found in the indigenous languages. On the issue of political participation however, it is very clear that individuals' involvement at both regional and national levels, depends largely on the ability to conduct their discourse in English. The manifestos of political parties are written in English, because each party draws its membership from different angles of the country, any discussion therefore, would be somewhat difficult if any of the indigenous languages should be chosen for that purpose.

One other point that needs to buttress the view that English is no longer foreign to Nigeria is the way in which trainings and instructions in science and technology are conducted. Due to the technicalities and complexities of the vocabularies involved, the teaching of science and technology in Nigeria is totally done in English language. Its practice, illustrations and explanations in firms and industries continue to be in English language. For that reason, we have all come to accept English as a medium or language communication in those specialized fields. However, in as much as we have all accepted to use English in the vast majority of areas, it would be out of place for anybody to still regard English as foreign to Nigeria.

Conclusion

So far, we have attempted to juxtapose the views put forward by different scholars as to whether English is foreign or not to Nigeria. It is an undeniable fact that English does not belong to any particular tribe in Nigeria. Besides, opinions of some scholars depict English language as not being able to express some salient aspects of our culture. This revelation and several others already discussed in the paper may lead us to pitch tent with the school of thought that sees English language as foreign to Nigeria. However, it will not be an overstatement to consider English language as no longer foreign to Nigeria, if we take into consideration the numerous functions it performs in Nigeria today. It is wrong to continue to perceive English as a foreign language or worse still as alien language. English is our heritage; we have claimed and accepted it. We have gone further to redefine it to suit our every day needs. More so, Adekunle (1985:36, 38) in Ajami T. T. (2007) make the following observation:

The English language has, as a result of many years of active use in the Nigerian speech community ... become part of Nigeria's contemporary environment and behavior. It is an artifact whose foreign derived components have in the process of its evolution combined with native Nigerian elements to make it local.

Better still, it is not an overstatement to assert that the most important and prevailing unifying factor that keeps Nigeria together as a nation is the English language. The various ethnic nationalities that make up Nigeria were sovereign states before the advent of colonialism; it is only with the acceptance and use of English that the country's fragile unity has been sustained.

Recommendation

English should be given more attention or put into mainstream of the Nigerian society in order to develop its technology and this will solve socio-economic challenges.

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