



HARNESSING THE POTENTIAL OF NIGERIAN PIDGIN TO SERVE AS A TOOL FOR NATIONAL INTEGRATION

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Abstract

This paper critically examined the issues surrounding the choice of an indigenous language(s) as Nigeria's national language, and resolved that provided focus remains on the indigenous languages, the national language question will continue to linger in the Nigerian linguistic space in spite of the provisions in the language policy. It argued that Nigerian Pidgin is a language capable of not only being the national language for Nigeria, but has all the potential to serve as a unifying factor and a major tool for enhancing national integration in a nation so divided along ethnic lines. It concluded that seeing as Nigeria's national language issue may never be peacefully resolved in favour of an indigenous mother tongue due to the multiplicity of languages and the deep affinity that their speakers have with them, the Nigerian government should consider recognizing, standardizing and adopting Nigerian Pidgin as Nigeria's national language and as the language for instruction and research.

Keywords: *Nigerian Pidgin, national language, indigenous languages, multilingualism*

Introduction

The argument and the concomitant call for a national language for Nigeria—one of indigenous origin by a large section of linguists of Nigerian extraction has, for the most part, been driven by the perceived need for Nigeria, as an independent nation, to break free from the post-colonial grip of her colonizers—the British. It is believed, by many who hold this view, that the English language in Nigeria is, in fact, a vestige of colonialism—a historical fact most Nigerians, understandably,

frown at. The argument is therefore that the English language should not continue to be our lingua franca. It is believed that a national language will not only go a long way in fostering national unity but will also enhance self-discovery and pride by which we can prove to ourselves and the world at large that we are truly independent of Britain (Olagoke 1982).

But, perhaps, a more pressing need for a national language transcends the pride of national sovereignty and of total independence which Nigerians fight so eagerly for. The greater need, it will seem, is necessitated by the threat to the continual existence of Nigeria as one united nation. The need for a national language is therefore not so much for external purposes as it should be internal. Nigeria, as we know it today, is a conglomeration of several African Kingdoms and territories brought together by colonialists. The enormous ethno-linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity of this conglomerate has remained a major bane of its nationhood; but no time in Nigeria's history has the nation been this polarised along the aforementioned lines. There is therefore more need for a language that will not only serve as a tool for national identity but as a premise for national integration.

National language

"National language" is probably the term that is more commonly used when talking about a language which is generally spoken in a specific country. Factually, however, the term "national language" simply means that there is some type of a connection between a territory and the language spoken there.

Lepage (1964) refers to national language as a common language which is the expression of a common interest among a group of people.

Akindele and Adegbite (1999) give a more comprehensive explanation:

National language refers to a language which has the authority of the government conferred on it as the language of a number of ethnic groups in a given geo social-political area. It is deliberately chosen as a symbol of oneness, unity and of achievement of independence in an erstwhile colonial situation and of the state of nationhood. Such a language must, as a matter of necessity, cut across the entire strata of the society in its use and application... It can also be qualified as a language that is both elite and masses oriented, integrating everybody, in the political community.

From the above definitions, it can be deduced that the underlying factor is that such a language that must qualify as a national language must be indigenous to the people who speak it. There are only a few African countries that have been able to use an indigenous language as their national language. Those that readily come to mind are Somalia where the national language is Somali, Kenya and Tanzania speak Swahili, Ethiopia's is Amharic, and Malagasy is the national language in Madagascar, but even in these countries, their official languages are often a combination of a foreign language and their indigenous languages.

In Nigeria, attempts have been made to have such possibilities where the national language of the nation is totally indigenous or, at least, used at par with the foreign-cum-official language—English, seeing as English has attained the coveted position of 'lingua franca' as well as the convenient language of both official and intimate 'record keeping' and communication (Udofot, 2003). The language policy of Nigeria, which is government's policy statement on the issue of language(s) for the nation (Jiboku, 2002), and which touches on aspects of language such as its role and function are enshrined in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) and in the National Language Policy first formed in 1977 and then subsequently revised in 1981, 1998 and 2004. These documents give credence to both the English language and indigenous languages. There is a provision in the 1999 constitution, for instance, that allows for proceedings in the National Assembly to be conducted in any of the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) in addition to the English language "when adequate arrangement have been made therefore."

In section 1, paragraph 10 of The National Language Policy (2004), it is clearly stated that for the interest of national unity, it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. These policies, like many other similar ones, have however not seen the light of day as that "adequate arrangement" has continued to elude the nation, and English has continued to be preferred. English has continued to be the language of instruction from the primary to tertiary level in urban schools. The three major languages are no longer taught as compulsory subjects in public schools, and the National Assembly still hasn't found the premise upon which any of these languages can be used during plenary.

The National Language Question

The problem posed by Nigeria's need for a national language cuts across the multilingual, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural facets of the nation. It has remained

nearly impossible to, in actual sense, agree on which language(s) to imbibe amongst the over 500 languages in the nation, let alone implement such agreement. It has remained elusive because such a language as may be agreed on has to be a language or languages capable of receiving national acceptance at the expense of the development of other indigenous languages. This explains why even the so-called "big three" have been vehemently kicked against by other ethnic groups who feel it is unfair.

Ker (2022) points out that "A language policy that singles out only three languages for special attention is anything but fair." Attah (2014) is of the opinion that children whose mother tongue is not the accepted official language are not likely to find it less challenging than learning in English. Thus, while many Nigerians agree that an indigenous national language would serve the country better, they differ sharply on the choice of language.

Attah (2014) divides the proponents of an indigenous national language into three camps: the first camp are those who are of the opinion that the national language should come from the major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) because these languages already have geographic spread and millions of speakers, and have developed a good number of literature. There is however no consensus on which of the "big three" should be the choice.

The second camp are those who think that the national language should come from a minor language—one which may not be recognised even at a state level. This, they believe, will give speakers of such a language a sense of belonging while leading to the development of that minority language. Like the first camp, however, this too has failed to agree on which minority language it should be.

Then, there is a third group of persons that do not support the idea of using any of the existing indigenous languages whether major or minor. They are of the opinion that an entirely new language that is indigenous to Nigeria but does not belong to any particular ethnic group should be formed by mixing various languages such that the language will be entirely new. The chances of this ever happening are slimmer than the previous propositions. Attah (2014) describes it as "fanciful and bizarre" on three grounds:

First, artificially constructed languages have never worked anywhere since languages must spring from the emotional needs and linguistic habits of speakers. Second, it is impossible to learn all the languages to be integrated, and even if it was possible, how would the words in the

different languages be put together in the correct sequence? Third, the new language cannot be "neutral" as it is claimed, since it will be formed by mixing existing languages, and traces of the ancestral languages will be evident.

It is evident that the chances of ever having a national language from the existing indigenous languages in Nigeria is a far cry and will only further worsen the ethnic division that already threatens our existence as one nation. Needless to say that the fabrication of an entirely new language—WAZOBIA or GUOSA, as the proponents have chosen to refer to it—is at best wishful thinking, and will only lead to confusion and a further worsening of the problem of ethnicity as everyone would want for their language to be represented.

Nigerian Pidgin: A Neglected Language

Nigerian Pidgin, henceforth NP, like any other pidgin in the world, began as a makeshift language to aid communication between people of different linguistic backgrounds whose languages are mutually unintelligible and who do not speak each other's language, in Nigeria's case, the visiting Europeans to the shores of Nigeria for the purpose of trade with Nigerians (Elugbe and Omamor, 1991). Thus, pidgins begin as a language with "a reduced grammatical structure and a much narrower range of functions, compared to the languages which gave rise to them" (Crystal, 1987). This perhaps explains why Kperogi (2015) suggests that

Pidgins are characterized by a simple, often anarchic and rudimentary grammatical structure, a severely limited vocabulary, and are used for the expression of really basic thought-processes. This is because they emerged as emergency languages for casual, short-term linguistic encounters. Therefore, pidgins can't express high-minded thought-processes and are usually not anybody's primary or first language.

While it is true that pidgins generally have a simplified or reduced grammatical structure, and are initially developed to serve a very narrow range of functions in a restricted set of domains, their functions, especially when they are expanded or

stable, cannot be said to be narrow. Thus, pidgins, when they are fully expanded as in NP are, in fact, capable of expressing high-minded thought-processes.

Over the years, NP has undergone a process of development from being a mere makeshift language, accompanied by lots of gestures and mime into a well-established or expanded language with a well-developed and describable grammar. The vocabulary too, like the vocabulary of any living language in active use keeps expanding. In spite of this, NP has continued to be, arguably, the most neglected language in Nigeria (Deuber, 2015) as little attention has been given to it by the government. Yet, NP is limitless in its spread: it is used by all sectors of Nigeria's population and cuts across social and political class. NP is therefore a lingua franca for most Nigerians in various works of life and a socio-ethnic bridge.

A Viable Option

It is clear that the multilingual nature of Nigeria and the ethnocentric bias of the citizenry will not allow for the choice of an indigenous national language. Meanwhile, the call for self-identity and true independence, but even more so, the need for national unity remain issues that cannot be ignored as the continued existence of the nation depends on how much language barriers are bridged, ethnicity is overlooked, and the nation is seen as one. This can only be achieved with a language that is capable of expressing the thoughts, yearnings and nuances of the people of Nigeria while being totally free of ethnic colourations.

NP meets the above criteria; ignoring those who claim that it is a pseudo language. Elugbe and Omamor (1991) give a perfect answer by stating that NP is "an independent distinct language with a characteristic system that operates on the basis of well-defined and discoverable governing principles". Bulk of its vocabulary is derived from English, which is its lexifier, while the "structure and function are closely affiliated to Nigeria's indigenous languages, its substrate languages" (Aziza, 2015). Thus, NP is a language on its own. It is unintelligible to the white man and even to a Nigerian who has never learnt it. Thus, making NP the/an official language of Nigeria will harness the potentials of the language and also foster nationhood by removing the linguistic barrier that stalls national integration and unity.

In any case, Nigeria will not be the first multilingual nation to do so. Papua New Guinea, a country with an estimated population of about 8.9m (Wikipedia, n.d) is far more linguistically diverse than Nigeria with nearly 850 languages spoken in the country (The Economist, 2017). Papua New Guinea has since adopted Tok

Pisin, a creole, as one of its official languages. Perhaps, it is time the Nigerian government gave NP the recognition it deserves by first recognizing it as a language and then harnessing its potential to unify the linguistically divided nation.

Conclusion

Nigeria's national language issue may never be peacefully resolved in favour of an indigenous mother tongue due to the multiplicity of languages and the deep affinity that their speakers have with them. The Nigerian government should consider recognizing, standardizing and adopting NP, an already-existing language that is capable of expressing the thoughts, yearnings and nuances of its people while being totally free of ethnic colourations. This way, Nigerians can have a national language they can proudly call their own, be truly politically independent, and be on the right path to achieving national integration.

Suggestions

1. The Nigerian government should officially recognize NP as a language in and of itself so that it can feature and favourably compete with other languages in the Nigerian linguistic space.
2. There is a need to standardize NP by developing a simplified and acceptable orthography or writing system for it. This may include English letters but must also be phonetically based such that words are spelled and written as pronounced according to the sound patterns of NP so that NP sounds that are not in the English alphabet can be appropriately captured.
3. As a language that is indigenous and that has national spread, NP should be taught in schools (primary and secondary) like the other "major languages" until such a time as it is accepted as the language of instruction. This will go a long way in adding prestige to the language.
4. All research and discoveries emanating from Nigeria could be branded and patented in NP just like countries like China and Korea do to strengthen their national languages and maintain self-identity.

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