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Phone No: +2348039511789

E-mail: alameenalaira@gmail.com

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For further enquiries, please contact: Editor-in-Chief

SAJOLLCOS, HOD's Office,

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Gombe State University, Gombe sajollicos@gsu.edu.ng,

C/o: amgombe2@gsu.edu.ng



LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Mustapha Ibrahim Garba, PhD

Department of English and Linguistics
Federal University Dutse, Jigawa
igmustaphasays@gmail.com
08065951233

Sakina Wada

Department of English and Linguistics
Federal University Dutse, Jigawa

Suku Hyellamada Kenan, PhD

Department of Languages and Linguistics,
Gombe State University,
hyellawilbe@gmail.com
08139668910

Aishatu Bello Umar

School of Secondary Education Languages,
Department of English Language, Federal
College of Education (Technical) Gombe
aishatubu@gmail.com
08036585813.

Hannatu Joseph Bega

Department of Modern Languages,
College of Education Billiri.
hannatujosephbega@gmail.com

Ibrahim Garba Nayaya (Baba)

National Teachers' Institute, Kaduna.
ibrahimba182@gmail.com
+2347066366586/ +2348125351694

Danlami Bala Gwammaja, PhD

Aminu Kano College of Islamic and Legal
Studies, Kano
danlamigwammaja@gmail.com
08020605148

Musa Ahmad Sani

Department of Arts Education, Faculty of
Education, Kaduna State University
musa.ahmad@kasu.edu.ng
08035562885

Abdullahi Dahiru Umar, PhD

Department of English and Literature,
Federal University Gusau
dumar@fugusau.edu.ng
08065726292

AbdulAzeez Lawal, PhD

Department of English and French, Umaru
Musa Yar'adua University, P. M. B. 2218,
Katsina
abdulazeez.lawal@umyu.edu.ng

Abdulrahman Idris Abdulwaheed, PhD

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Faculty of Arts, Yobe State
University, Damaturu
Email: iabdulrahman2255@gmail.com
08037041081

Hamidou Bappa, PhD

Department of English Language and
Literatures of English Expression, Higher
Teachers' Training College Maroua,
University of Maroua, P.O. BOX 55 Maroua,
Cameroon
Email: hamidoubappa@gmail.com
Tel: 696551858

Theodore Bebey, PhD

Department of English Language and
Literatures of English Expression, Higher
Teachers' Training College Maroua,
University of Maroua, P.O. BOX 55 Maroua,
Cameroon
Bebeylawane@yahoo.fr
/bebeytheodore20@gmail.com

Abdurrazak Abubakar

Department of English Language, Federal
College of Education (Technical) Bichi,
P.M.B. 3473 Kano State, Nigeria
abubakarabdulrazak296@gmail.com
07036051705



Sani Isma'il Abubakar

Department of English Language, Federal
College of Education (Technical) Bichi,
P.M.B. 3473 Kano State, Nigeria
ismailsania@gmail.com
07064891033

Malata Andrew Zakayo, PhD

Department of Languages and Linguistics,
Gombe State University,
zakayomalataandrew@gmail.com
08027326216

Ismail Bala
.....

Abubakar Mohammed Gombe, PhD

Department of Languages and
Linguistics, Gombe State University
08060839578
amgombe2@gsu.edu.ng

John O, Udeigwe Ph.D

Department Of English
Language/Literature
Abia State University – Uturu
jo.udeigwe@abiastateuniversity.edu.ng
08146142122

Shamsuddeen Ismaila

Department of Hausa, Shehu Shagari
College of Education, Sakkwato
Shamsuddeenismail83@gmail.com

Mshelbwala Comfort Usman

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Federal University of Kashere,
Gombe State, Nigeria
08067131647
comfortbwala01@gmail.com,

Shehu Yahuza Abbas

Department of General Studies, Isa
Mustapha Agwai 1 Polytechnic,
Lafia, Nasarawa State, Nigeria
abbassshehuyahuza@gmail.com /
Phone: 07030573795 / 08125163443,

Shema'u Abubakar Umar

shemauari@gmail.com / Phone:
08035965496
Department of General Studies, Isa
Mustapha Agwai 1 Polytechnic,
Lafia, Nasarawa State, Nigeria

Ibrahim Muhammed Ogah

ogahibrahim075@gmail.com / Phone:
07067169460
Department of General Studies, Isa
Mustapha Agwai 1 Polytechnic, Lafia,
Nasarawa State, Nigeria

Sani Saidu

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Yobe State University
sani002saidu@gmail.com
08061353634

Umar Amos Hadiya

Department of Languages and
Communication, Federal Polytechnic
Mubi
umardamos@gmail.com
08034846180

Abdullahi Usman Garko

Department of Languages and
Linguistics, Gombe State University
augarko@gsu.edu.ng



Angela Butack

Department of Languages and
Linguistics, Gombe State University

Fatima Ibrahim Usman

Dept of Languages and Linguistics
Gombe State University
+234 7041726084
phartimaribrahim@gmail.com

Tarr, Mathias

Department of Languages, Nigerian
Defiance Academy, Kaduna
08034641925
tarrmathias@yahoo.com

Fatima, Inuwa S. Gara, PhD

Department of Languages and
Linguistics, Gombe State University
08039199933
fatigara2@gmail.com

Apasi Marizukot Ahuoyiza

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Bayero University, Kano

Adamu Idris, PhD

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Bayero University, Kano
aidris@buk.eng.edu.ng

Ibrahim Sofiyat Temitope

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Bayero University, Kano



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English Language in Nigeria, Past, Present and the Future: a Concerned Issue

John O, Udeigwe, PhD

Department Of English Language/Literature

Abia State University – Uturu

jo.udeigwe@abiastateuniversity.edu.ng

08146142122

Abstract

Nigeria is a multilingual nation that has serious language problems. From generation to generation, language has remained the only source of transmitting cultures, values, norms and beliefs to her citizens. Language is also one of the determining factors to the status and nature of any nation. 1960 is a remarkable date in Nigeria with the attainment of independence that warded off every aspect of imperialism, “language” in inclusive. In spite of many indigenous languages in Nigeria, the language of the colonial masters “English Language” is still waxing stronger in Nigeria more than ever. This paper takes a critical look at the English language in the past, the present and the future. It discusses the inroads of English into Nigerian linguistic environment and x-rays the functions of English side-by-side with the indigenous languages. It discusses attempts made so far to replace the English language with indigenous languages. The policy of the Nigeria government, for instance, the constitution and the national policy on education. The above review shows that the English language has come to stay permanently in Nigeria.

Keywords: Indigenous Languages, Language Policy, multilingualism, National Language and WAZOBIA.

Introduction:

A brief history of the English language in “NIGERIA” and the arrival of the Portuguese at the West Coast on a trade (mission) in the fifteenth century also helped to separate the variety of English language in Nigeria the trading activities between the Portuguese and the people of the West Coast

eventually led to a Portuguese – based pidgin (Akinjobi 2004:34) The nineteenth century came with the abolition of slave trade. The freed slaves had acquired the language of their masters or bastardized forms of it (Awonisi 2024:51). Akindele and Adegbite (1999:57) posit that some of the freed slaves who were Christians in orientation became



interpreters and translators in Christian evangelization during the early missionary period while some others learnt the language and became catechists and teachers in the mission school.

According to Eligbe (1990), Nigeria has between 394-400 languages, Adegbite (2023) notes that there are over 450 indigenous languages. However, Essen (2005) maintains that the figure 515 indigenous languages. The official major national languages in Nigeria are Igbo Hausa and Yoruba. A house of representative member in Adamawa North-West constituency Mallam A. Y. Bala, while contributing on the debate on the floor of the parliament in 1961, moved that the house urges the government in consultation with regional government to introduce the teaching of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba into the institution of learning, throughout the country, with a view of adopting one of them as our official language in the near future. (Daily Express 1961). According to Lawal (2009:39), three opinions emerged from the discussions which followed that move. The first group supported the motion and would like a Nigerian language to emerge as an official language in the future. The second group basically supported the motion but maintained that Hausa be expressly designated as an official

language while the third group rejected the motion to replace English with a Nigerian language stating that to do away with English means to cut Nigeria off from the world of civilization and progress.

Based on the above argument one can now see that the replacement of English language in Nigeria with any of the indigenous languages has been a very difficult issue for years. All the attempts did not work out since the three major languages in Nigeria are not mutually intelligible, the option therefore is to look for a language that will be acceptable to different ethnic groups in the society – a language which, according to Babajide (2001), has a considerable national and international coverage of users, enjoys a metropolitan status; has a numerical strength and some measure of economic political powers; and lastly has a sufficient reliable codified form. It should be a language which conforms to the United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (1971) reports that the official language to be adopted by any nation of the world should be a (native and neutral language). In views of the fact that the so-called three major indigenous languages do not meet the criteria or stipulated guidelines by UNESCO and Babajide (2001). this paper

recommends the use of English language side-by-side with indigenous languages.

The 1960 independence brought about the internal national debate on the status of the English language in Nigeria. There were two schools of thought on this debate: the first is made up of the politicians and the second is that of language scholars. The argument is whether an indigenous language should replace English language at independence. This has been a very big issue that has not been resolved. This shows that Nigeria is politically independent, but linguistically dependent, since English language is still waxing even stronger in the nation at the expense of the indigenous languages. The question is now "how long will the status quo keep on? Will there be future alternative? This is the focus of this work.

On Indigenous National Language

Various scholars and individuals have suggested the need for Nigeria to have a national language (indigenous) that is not English. Ibineweka (2004) suggested a fusion of some indigenous languages which he called "Guosa". The language should be drawn from twenty-two Nigerian languages. Thus, he produced a 52-page dictionary for it. This was

criticized on the ground that the language was too artificial and that Igbineweka will be the sole arbiter of the grammar of any of its sentence which would be absurd. The trilingual "WAZOBIA" was also proposed by Jowitt (1995:45); it is a synthesis of the three major languages: WA means "come" in Yoruba, ZO also means "Come" in Hausa and BIA translates into Igbo as "come". Some scholars reasoned that the synthesis arrangement of WAZOBIA is more of an artificial and mechanistic contradiction in which bits (lexical items) of the three major languages have to be pieced together for a given expression. The correctness of the expression is also in doubt, because to ascertain that will mean to go to people or group of people that did the coinages for the new national language to confirm it.

Still in search of a good alternative for national language in Nigeria, scholars have nominated Nigerian and non-Nigerian languages. Wole Soyinka, for instance, proposed "Swahili". He argues that its phonology and grammar makes it indigenous to Africa; it is well developed and it is being used as a national language in East Africa. Sofunke suggested "Igala" because of its geographical position to bridge the gap between the largely Islamic North and the largely Christian South. Igaia, from the



look of things, is even more foreign to most of Nigerians than even English and therefore was not equally accepted. Scholars also suggest that the government should legislate one of the indigenous languages and order everyone to learn it within a specified period of time. There is no doubt that the above suggestion will not go well with a lot of ethnic groups, considering the disparate components that Nigeria is made off. Each ethnic group will rather want their own native language be the one the government legislates upon rather than any other. Therefore, every attempt, by way of suggestion, to replace the function and status of the English language with an indigenous language failed. This makes it clear that the English language and the roles it plays in Nigeria remains intact.

English Versus Indigenous Languages

The period of British colonial rule enhanced the use of English in Nigeria. With the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates in 1914, it became more appropriate to have a common language that will unite the country and makes governance easier. As the English language is already on the ground, the colonial masters made it the language of politics and all forms of official transactions,

administration education, and several others. Official government businesses are conducted in English at the three tiers of government – federal, state and local government levels. The Education Ordinance of 1882, which declares English as the language of instructions in schools and certification system and which specifies a "Pass" in English is mandatory for the award of certificates, required for employment in the government establishments and commercial firms, all helped to entrench English in Nigeria at the expense of indigenous languages. Government policies and official publications are made in English. More importantly, the Nigerian constitution is written in English. Today, the Nigerian linguistic situation has made the English language attain the status of national language because It is called to duty in almost all matters of serious concern. Uhumwangho (2000:5) posits that the English language has shaped Nigerian linguistic environment in a way that the indigenous languages play second fiddle to it. All the languages in Nigeria have a particular number of speakers but none could satisfy the UNESCO (1971) specification of "neutrality", because from all indication, no native Nigerian language is neutral. The survival of Nigeria would be seriously threatened, even if any of the

constitutionally recognized three major languages (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) is recognized by government as a national Language. English is the only language that breaks all forms of ethnicity and language barriers. The integrative role is virtually shown in all strata of Nigerian life. It is a language of nationalism, because through it, Nigerians love for one nation as a whole manifests. According to Adegbija (1994:50), the advent of English language has removed what he described as "deep rooted mutual suspicion that results in prejudice, stereotypes and subtle linguistic hostility among various linguistic groups" The role and the importance of English in Nigeria is numerous; many Nigerian writers use English to write Nigerian literatures. By so doing, it has helped to mirror Nigeria and Nigerians outside the world. English is needed as a prerequisite for admission into higher institutions. It is a language of international relations and diplomacy. It serves as language of technological empowerment and a means of stamping Nigeria's collective identity on national institutions.

Most Nigerian languages are not developed to the level of being used as national languages. Ethnologue (2009) posits that out of 450 indigenous languages, less than 30% of them have orthography, primers,

elaboration of functions, creation of metal language, (the above makes it possible for a language to function as a language of study and instruction). This also includes modernization of numeration system. Most Nigerian languages do not have comprehensive dictionaries to cater for all the words that exist in that language. English has enjoyed a wider acceptance by Nigerians than the indigenous languages. In most homes in Nigeria, indigenous languages are forbidden to be spoken by members in favor of the English language. Some public and private schools most often encourage both teachers and students to speak English both within and outside classrooms. Some schools also impose fines or punishment of various kinds for defaulters. Igboanusi and Ohia (2001:130-134) notes that a higher percentage of respondents (65.7% out of a total of 100%) prefer the use of English as Nigerian lingua franca. Other scholars who examine the same phenomenon are Bamgbose (1985) Oyetatede (2001) and Ansre (1975) among others.

Nigeria Language Policy

Many scholars discuss language policy in different ways (Akindele and Adegbite, 1999, Ubahakwe 1973). According to them, effective language policy requires the formulation and

implementation of official statement and decisions about proper utilization of language resources within a bilingual or multilingual setting. This constitutes the important part of national planning for sustainable development. Essien (2023:24) defines it as a document of government that contains principles, ideas, guidelines, objectives, stipulation and provisions of language, usually for nation and state. Language policy involves a continuous process that lays a sequence of planned formation, conduct and planning a set of activities in a programmed time schedule and at the same time preparing planning system of adjust and correct itself according to the information fed back from the addressee of the planned output.

A policy therefore is a course of action to be taken on any issue of national interest which is contained in national documents, such as the constitution. Language policy, on the other hand, is the government document that contains principles, ideas and guidelines to be followed on matters of language within a bilingual or multilingual nation. The pre-independence language policy in Nigeria gave English language a serious advantage to flourish at the expense of indigenous languages.

Also, the constitution of 1946 was the first to declare English as the official language and the language of administration in Nigeria. The British colonial government put in a lot of policies that favoured the continued existence of English in Nigeria. Among the policies also include the Education Ordinances of 1882, 1896, 1916 which declared English as the language of instructions in schools. They also introduced the certification system in the country's educational system that elevated English language to the highest prominence and relevance in Nigeria. The post-independence language policy Nigeria formulated was a chance to elevate indigenous languages to prominence above English. That was a missed opportunity. Thus, English still maintains great advantages over our indigenous languages. The Nigeria constitution of 1999 section 55 states that:

The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, and in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made therefore, the same goes to the House of Assembly as continue in section 97 of the 1999 constitution.



The business of the House of Assembly shall be conducted in English but the House may in addition to English conduct the business of the state as the House may by resolution approve going' by the provision of the Nigerian constitution on what it says about the indigenous languages, one will simply take that English language as come to stay permanently in Nigeria. Imagine that in National Assembly, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba indigenous languages can only be used when adequate arrangement are made. Where are the criteria for adequate arrangement, no one knows. House of Assembly is not left out either. It states that, where one or more languages can be used in addition to English as the House may by resolution approve. This appear very impossible in a state that have multilingualism. For instance in the Second Republic between 1979-1983, there were debates in the National Assembly to find a way of implementing the policy statement. It generated a lot of opposition who maintained that English language is the

only neutral language that could most effectively serve as the instrument of Nigeria nationalism and they had their ways. The government is not serious to ensure that the policy is strictly followed. For example, all the private schools in Nigeria do not use indigenous languages as the medium of instruction. English language serves as the only medium of instruction while the indigenous languages are merely being taught as subjects.

The National policy in Education (NPE 2024) states that the medium of instruction in pre-primary and early primary education should be mother tongue or language of immediate environment. For secondary education at the junior secondary school level, students should be required to learn English as well as two Nigerian languages, one of which will be the language of their area, while the other will be any of the three other languages, subject to the availability of teachers. In senior secondary schools, they will be required to learn English and one Nigerian language. There are so many obstacles in the of the attempt to replace English with any indigenous language. For instance, it will take very many years for



an indigenous language, that is used as the medium of instruction only in the pre-primary levels, to be developed in the level in which it will function as the national language. Again, there is lack of qualified teachers qualified to teach the language in the state where they are not dominant, which is also a problem to the implementation of the policy. Our three major languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, are taught in our schools with limited qualified teachers, but the choice of any of them to be upgraded as a national language may end up in vain, because of ethnic attachment in each of the languages. In Nigeria, no group would like any other language other than his to be elevated. Going by the above argument, one can see that English language enjoys a superior status at the expense of all the indigenous languages and have finally come to stay.

English language in Nigeria: The Future

It has now become a public opinion that English functions in many communicative domains in Nigeria. It is a language for all government transactions, commerce and industry, the language of national and international communication, language of the media, language of law, language of science and technology, language of social

interaction and natural integration. Also, it is the language of education, a medium of instruction in schools (primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. The above points have proved that Nigeria cannot function well without English. Some scholars have put it thus: Alo (2005:166) defines Nigerian English as a term we use to designate the variety of English spoken and written in Nigeria. Nigerian English is a domesticated variety of English which functions within Nigerian linguistic and socio-cultural setting as a second language. Adegbija (2004:20) notes that domestication gives birth to Nigerian English. It also connotes 'home grown, native' and adapted to suit the Nigerian environment'. In this case it signifies that the English Language has become a Nigerian property. It is now English which equals other world English but coloured by the socio-cultural realities of its users within its context of use. Therefore the future of English is guaranteed though, no longer in British version but now in the Nigerian variety of English.

Conclusion

The Nigerian linguistic environment has accepted English as an integral part of it. English serves as the only source of unity and national integration which is of immense important to



the existence of Nigeria. The concern now should be shifted to how best English could be developed for international intelligibility and national communication.

Recommendation

- The government should, as a matter of importance regularly, organize seminars and workshops for school teachers and students, and also encourage its use in all examinations conducted in the country.
- Nigerian writers, artistes and the media must be encouraged to adopt it locally and internationally through literacy texts, movies, television and radio programs.
- Its continuous standardization at all linguistic levels should be encouraged at the levels phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. Authors should be encouraged to write books in these areas.
- Comprehensive dictionaries that will cater for all the words that exist in it should be made available.
- Every available means should be used by the government to encourage

language scholars to further establish and develop all parameters that will identity Nigerian English and make it generally intelligible within and outside Nigeria.

- As normal for formal identification, the government should make a policy statement which makes it compulsory for use in the country.

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