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English in the Multilingual Nigeria: Implications for Users

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Abstract

Human activities are inextricably interwoven with language since language is the link between people and the affairs in the society. Its interaction with the society often produces a result which may be positive or negative. In a multilingual society like Nigeria, language use is somewhat challenging to harness. This paper studied the adoption of English as a second language in Nigeria with a focus on the political, economic, educational, psychological and socio-cultural implications. The results of its use are discussed as retrieved from literatures. This paper corroborated the literary assertions on the implications of the adoption of English in Nigeria.

Key Words: implications, adoption, English, second, national

Introduction

The relevance of language in any human community is undeniably very significant. It serves as a tool for unity, empowerment, growth and development. By its uses, it is seen as a necessary aspect of human existence. However, its purpose is easier to achieve in a monolingual society than a multilingual society for the fact that in the former, there is a unified mutual intelligibility upon which other factors develop on. In the latter, a single language must first be unanimously adopted. The adopted language could be a foreign language made to serve as a second language or an indigenous language serving as a national language.

In Nigeria, we are densely blessed with a myriad of languages and cultures with no indigenous national language. This multiplicity contributes to the inaccuracy in the number of languages counted by linguists as languages in Nigeria. Linguists, only estimate and so far, the highest counted is that recorded by Banjo in Eka (2000) giving a total of about 513 indigenous languages. This diversity also questions national unity.

To cope with these complexities, the adoption of English was indeed very pertinent. That is why, ever since its advent in the 17th century, it has been used as a common means of communication among Nigerians. It has assumed many functions at various levels even to the extinction or near extinction of some indigenous languages (Elugbe & Omamor, 1991). In spite of the challenges it poses to the

indigenous languages, it is lawfully adopted in the nation's constitution as the country's second language and just in recent times, its adoption as a national language has been strongly debated for on media.

The term, 'Second Language' is used to refer to a language that is learned and extensively in addition to the first language. In other words, we use the term second language to describe the language a bilingual or multilingual person acquires and uses extensively after the first language. Today, in many parts of the world the English language is used as a second language. This is exactly the situation in Nigeria, India, Kenya, Ghana, Singapore, Sierra-Leone, among others (Ekpe, 2010). Where English is used as a second language, there are expected positive as well as negative implications.

However, whatever stance it takes and whichever function it serves, its existence has political, economic, educational, psychological and socio-cultural implications that affect its users. This paper therefore discusses these implications of adopting English in Nigeria as a second language, or a national language in these areas.

The Nigerian Linguistic Situation

In Nigeria today, there is a complex linguistic situation in terms of language preference and usage. People tend to the use of a non-native language for official and non-official purposes; this breeds an attitudinal drawback in the use of indigenous languages while granting a wider space for the multiplication of the non-native language(s). According to Ogunmodimu (2015) the complexity of the linguistic situation in Nigeria can be described as the biblical tower of Babel. To curb 'Babelian' confusion, Ekpe (2010) recorded that English has grown to become the official language and functions as a language of education, media, religion, politics, governance and law. By its widespread and functional usage, it has become the first language for some Nigerians.

More so, because of its non-ethnic heritage in Nigeria, it is most accepted as it dismisses fear of ethnic dominance, though the forms produced bear ethnic identities. Thus, the multilingual complexity is comprised of indigenous languages, English and English varieties (Ogunmodimu, 2015).

The Use of the English in Nigeria: Implications

The power of the English language is seen in the political, economic and educational spheres of the global stage. Politically, English is an official or working language of most international political gatherings throughout the world (Crystal, 2003) and 85% of international organizations use English as the language of official communications. Economically, the Harvard Business Review calls English "the global language of business" (Neeley, 2012). As corporations expand the scope of operations to various countries, "geographically dispersed employees have to work together to meet common goals" (Neeley, 2012).

A common working language is a requirement for that cooperation. Furthermore, as developing countries seek to compete in the global marketplace, English is the language in which most negotiation and marketing schemes must take place. English is also the primary language of academia, as the majority of academic publications are written in English (Negash, 2011). As Crystal (2003) asserts, "access to knowledge is the business of education.

Political Implications

The adoption of English as a second language in Nigeria obviously has some political implications because language and politics are two perspectives that must always meet as far as humans exist. According to Ezema (2009), politics is a property of man. He further stated that, [politics] "concerns the organization of the affairs of a society for the common good of the society members.... It must be in conformity with the people's ethics". Therefore, language plays a very important role in the

political sphere. Considering the multilingual and multicultural nature of Nigeria, indigenous languages may not effectively function in pursuing a common good. Thus, the adoption of English is beneficial.

According to Ezema (2009), the implications of this adoption is the obvious reality that political education, political enlightenment, political activities are all carried on in the English language, these achievements are positive to the overall good of the citizens but when followers become attracted to a person according to his level of language command, there is a negative function of the language, in most cases, dominance and mind control. Nigerian politicians are much aware of the latter and thus employ clichés and stale phrases especially when there is an intention to lure their listeners to themselves. These forms include: “toe the line”, “status quo”, “ameliorate”, “an axe to grind”, “expedite”. For example, the Akwa-Ibom state governor’s speech on May 29, 2015 was replete with these expressions but today, we realise that the well-formed speech was not to be hoped on. He promised to *expedite* actions for the payment of owed gratuities; the story is still as he met it.

However, Olusoji (2012) commented that “politics in Nigeria would have been a difficult business but not for the ease of communication brought in by the English language” (p.137). He further noted that it [English] has contributed to the existing unity in the community.

Economic Implications

A country’s economy includes all its sources of growth. The use of a linguistic tool for this achievement is very fundamental. In Nigeria, the major source of business or economic development is oil production and the foundation of its success is the existence of English as an official language. Oil is drilled in the southern part of the country but Nigeria has no refinery and so depends on other countries that refine and sell to us. The relationship established for this transaction is achieved with the use of the global language-English. Plonski (2013) categorically stated that countries seeking economic growth turn to English as a tool to attract foreign market. In other smaller businesses in our communities, we observe that trade contact is bound in English. People of different tongue live together; as such we trade with the common language in Nigeria.

Olusoji (2012) stated that a common implication of the adoption of English on the economy of Nigeria is reflected in the level of educational attainment. People can now access information and compete favourably with the outside world and this is why we see economic increase in agriculture, transportation, arts, etc. Today, people engaged in mechanized farming brought about by their ability to gain the right information. According to Negash (2011), millions of African farmers are dependent on their negotiation skills which include their command of English.

Educational Implications

Education is one sector of any society that receives keen attention if there is an expected growth in the economy. This is because societal development is enhanced through education. Olusoji (2012) noted that, it is through education that one gains knowledge for all fields of human endeavor. Thus, the use of language cannot be undermined especially in a culturally and linguistically diverse nation like Nigeria.

Ekpe (2010) observed that when formal education embraced the use English as policies on education specified its use as a medium of instruction; it was done in order to permit communal exchanges as people could leave and learn from anywhere. This freedom allows not only intellectual exchanges but an overall effect has been felt in other sector especially the economic sector, this is as a result of the use of English in education.

Earlier on Adededeji (1984) had buttressed the importance of the use of English in education when he pointed out that

a science student needs language for acquiring and communicating knowledge and skills in science and technology. He needs language to help him define concepts and describe substances, objects, locations and processes, report facts, draw inferences, make conclusions, classify items and make generalizations.

This attainment is an implied effect of the use of a common language that can communicate in this area. Hence, the adoption and use of English in Nigeria for purposes of education is quite positive. Today, we can identify Nigerians who have been noted for outstanding performances the world over. The knowledge used was gained through education and instruction was passed in the English language.

Akpotaire (2013) published sixteen Nigerian investors that were nominated for the World Intellectual Property Day celebrated every April 26. Among them are Saheed Adepoju, Seyi Oyesola, Jelani Aliyu, Ndubuisi Ekekwe, Col. Oviemo Ovadje (Rtd.), Cyprian Emeka Uzoh, Sebastine Chinonye Omeh, Shehu Saleh Balami. Their excellence buttressed Adededeji's point on the use of English in Education

More so, linguists have observed that a multilingual child learns better than a monolingual child because he has to his advantage other languages with which he can use to establish a better understanding of the concept created (Olusiji, 2012). Thus, English complements the indigenous languages in helping the child gain better understanding of what is taught.

Psychological Implications

Considering the linguistic and cultural nature of the country and the communicative functions of English in Nigeria, there are expected psychological implications. This is explained in Eka (2000) when he opined that "language determines thought and that our thoughts are shaped by the language we speak and how we think to a large extent depends on our worldview" (p.37).

Going by this explication of Eka, we can appreciate that adopting the English language in Nigeria changes the cognitive shapes of its users who sometimes are not competent or confident in their use of the language. This implies that even when a user is able to develop a global worldview by his use of the language there is likely a misrepresentation of concept. For example, Achebe's writings in a domesticated English form are attempts to balance his worldview in using a non-native language to express his culture. Wa Thiongo, boldly disassociated himself from this psychological drama of using English to express his Senegalese culture.

Also, in language development, we may find users who have difficulty in the expression of their thought as a result of their inability to grasp the right concept for their expression in English or intimidation of discourse participant. For example, a study conducted by Fatiloro (2015) on the psychological effect of English in Nigeria in a conversation between a lecturer and a student, he clearly observed that, dialogue in the language can stimulate a psychological imbalance especially when the speaker is deficient in the language as in the dialogue below:

Student: Good morning ma
 Lecturer: Morning (with derision). At 2pm?
 Student: sorry ma, good afternoon
 Lecturer: can I help you
 Student: Yes ma, my GNS 001 work?

- Lecturer: your GNS 001 work or mark? What about it?
 Student: it is find ma
 Lecturer: found or missing
 Student: my classmates informs me of the missing score, ma
 Lecturer: have you forgotten your concord rules?
 Student: yes ma, I don't ma
 Lecturer: I'm afraid, I have a class now, comeback same time tomorrow
 Student: O.K ma

In trying to understand what experience a user of English as a second language has, this short dialogue explains. The student is incompetent and this is traumatic, his mission is aborted because he is inept. Given another opportunity possibly where he could communicate in his native tongue, his expression would have been cohesive and coherent. Thus, the use of English as a second language in Nigeria creates a traumatic experience for its users.

Socio-cultural Implications

How does language reflect the socio-cultural practices of a people? Sapir in Onuh and Uwadiogwu Chinedozi (2014) explained that “language and culture share an inextricable relationship which is deeply rooted in every human society.” The implication of language on our socio-cultural life is thus, that language is used to make and convey socio-cultural ties which are native to the people. It therefore becomes challenging to express socio-cultural experiences with a non –native language. Hence, the use of English for this purpose produces negative implications.

Anyanwu (2016) observed that “the use English in Nigeria cuts across ethnic boundaries as each ethnic group has distinct traditional language and tradition which it has replaced, thus, it is not only a means of communication but a marker of a speaker’s cultural identity. By this it means that in Nigeria, English has become a medium through which culture is expressed.

For instance, old traditions preserved in written literatures are today scripted in English. An example is the moon tales that are told to generations not in their native language but in English. Where this applies, there is a cultural dilution of value and content. The story of the tallest tree in my village is now narrated in English and the new generation feels it is one of those superstitious stories because certain values have been lost during the course of narration as a result of the language employed. Also, we cannot deny the fact that it is our attempt of being English that has influenced our dressing culture, feeding habit and social norms like greeting and respect. A child can easily wave pass an elder without any feeling of disrespect, elderly speeches are interrupted by the young who have lost the culture.

As such it is important to understand that in spite of the many purposes English serves, the use of an indigenous language in socio-cultural activities is more effective but the expression of a socio-cultural norm in an alien language exposes the norms to death or what Ifeyinwa (2016) calls a “double jeopardy of disappearing.

However, Ifeyinwa (2016) noted that asides its negative implications, the language can be applauded for its promotion of interactive integration which has helped the child’s learning process by the privilege it grants the child to be exposed to a culture other than his own.

Implications of Adopting English as a National Language

A national language is considered as the main language of a nation. For example, German is the national language of Germany and there is no doubt that, it is the main language of the nation. However, the adjective main is very ambiguous since it is not clear whether it connotes the language that is most widely used in a country going by the count of its users compared to other languages used in the country. In fact, the concept of a national language is equivocal because although a national language should enjoy a wider coverage among users within a country yet it is not a mandatory prerequisite. What may be more important is the basis of its selection. Thus, in a sense, national language is the language selected as the symbol of nationhood (Bamgbose, 2000). This definition is akin to another insightful definition which says that a 'national language is a language of national cohesion and unity'.

The last definition reiterates the value that the citizens of a country generally attach to their national language. This is comparable to what nationals often do to their national anthem and flag. In other words, to them, the national language is a symbol of common existence, sovereignty and unity. Holmes (1992, p. 105) defines a national language as a language generally developed and used as a symbol of national unity and it is often regarded as a symbol of nationhood. Also, a national language has been described as the language of a political, cultural and social unit.

Talking about its functions, a national language functions to ensure the unity of a state as well as to assert its independence – it unifies the state and also separates a state from other entities. A national language may have an official backing, in other words, a government may declare a particular language or dialect to be the national language of its country e.g. Bahasa Malaysia (Standard Malay) in Malaysia and Filipino in the Philippines. It has been suggested that it is possible to develop or construct a national language. For example, Bahasa Indonesia and Swahili were developed to serve as the national languages in Malaysia and Tanzania respectively.

From this explication, it appears that in terms of functions, a national language is distinct from an official language and a lingua franca although they may have some common characteristics. For example, a national language and an official language may enjoy official backing. However, government backing is not mandatory for a national language but it is for an official language. Also while a national language is symbolic, an official language is simply a language for government business, etc.

According to Holmes (1992, p. 105) sociolinguists often make a distinction between a national language and an official language along the affective-referential dimension, or more precisely, the ideological-instrumental dimension. As noted earlier, a national language can also be used as an official language. For example, Singapore has four official languages (Singaporean English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil), which are also the national languages of the country. In the same vein, it is not impossible to have one language serving as the national language and the lingua franca of a country, e.g. the use of Swahili in some parts of Africa (e.g. Tanzania).

In functions, we may have an overlap, in other words, a language might be used to serve as the official and national language, but that does not make them synonymous. In fact, it is not impossible for a nation to have the same (one) language serving the functions of the national and official language e.g., English is the official language in Britain and the unofficial national language as well.

It is the opinion of some writers that Nigeria should adopt one of her indigenous languages as the national lingua Franca. By this, they claim that the nation will have a total emancipation from her colonial legacy. This position appears beneficial when one thinks of the fact that Nigeria has over five hundred languages, none of which is used at any national capacity. Proponents of this orientation posit

that the adoption of an indigenous language would obliterate the elitism created by English and engender a level playing ground for equal intellectual, political and economic participation by the masses. This view generally holds that the suppression of English will be the promotion of indigenous languages and culture. While the nationalist ideal may be well intended, there are some socio-political factors that are drawbacks to this proposal.

The question which often arises is, which indigenous language would be chosen and accorded the preferred status of a national language? Some have argued that one of the three majority languages should be chosen given that they have a considerable number of speakers. This opinion has been seen as divisive because of the possibility of steering ethnic consciousness and defeating the sense of nationhood that the nationalist agenda seek to project.

Akinnaso (1994) observed that Nigerians are religiously loyal to their mother tongues and are contemptuous of other local languages. That observation is correct if the argument of language loyalty is constructed within a locus of intra-ethnic language choice, what seems to be the case however, is that Nigerian people are likely to privilege an exogenous/foreign but dominant language over their mother tongue that serves the local functions of identity and cultural authenticity marking. But not to stray away from the point made by Akinnaso (1994), a language, beyond serving communicative purposes, carries indexical attributes marking social, cultural and political identity. This ethnic attachment to language is a major reason why the choice of one indigenous language as the national language will forever be a mirage.

There is the salient fear of domination of the minority languages by the majority ones. To empower an indigenous language, as the national language is to by extension, empower the ethnicity of that chosen language above others. This will definitely do more harm than good in a system where ethnic tension is visible as manifested in the creation of ethnic militia groups and the politics of federal character.

In spite of the long-standing mirage as to which indigenous language should be the nation's national language, the projection of English (a neutral language) as a national language is still frowned at by most language experts based on political, economic, educational, psychological and socio-cultural reasons; thus, keeping the national language question pending. All of these reasons project the adoption of English as a national language as having negative implications.

Political Implication

While the English option may appear to be a practical alternative, many language experts and other Nigerians have advanced positive reasons to justify the adoption of an indigenous national language in the place of English.

Most of these arguments derive from the need for national consciousness, unity, and pride. An argument commonly put forward for the adoption of a local national language is the need to make a clean break with English in order to justify Nigeria's claim to political independence. Accordingly, English is a legacy of colonialism to which many Nigerians find difficult it to reconcile themselves. Olagoke (1982) argued

There are many Nigerians who feel strongly that the country needs a "lingua franca" other than English, not only to foster national unity but also to facilitate self-discovery and pride convincing the world and ourselves that we are truly independent of Britain.

That is to say that the adoption of English as a national language in the stead of the nation's indigenous languages presupposes Nigerian's dependence on its former overlords. This will only portray the nation as a man who claims to have outgrown the control of his parents but never stops

eating from his parents' pots because he can't fend for himself. For example, an African literary writer and critic, Ngugi wa Thiongo, criticized the use of English, French and other European languages by African writers. He argued that the unquestioned usage of European languages by Africans can be seen as their endorsement of Europe's perceived notion of Africa as a sub-human, uncivilized continent (Wa Thiongo, 1986).

Psychological Implication

The adoption of the English language as a national language in Nigeria has a negative psychological implication. It will undoubtedly create in the minds of many Nigerians the need to identify with foreign values rather than their cultural values. This is another form of colonisation --- colonisation of the mind. For colonization to achieve its aim of controlling Africa's wealth, Wa Thiongo (1986) asserted that "it needed to control Africans' mentality, culture and sense of identity. To do this, English, French and Portuguese were forced on Africa as tools of cultural alienation. The domination of a people's language by the language of the colonizing nation was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized..."

The use of any language confirms and perpetuates the subjugation of the mind to the workings and cultural values of that language. In the same vein, the use of a language associated with colonization confirms and perpetuates the subjugation of the nation to ex-colonial masters, and English is one of such languages. Leith (1983) also believed that English is seen as a symbol of dominance, exploitation and brings to mind the collusion with the white masters.

No wonder Ajulo (2000) argued that the need to accelerate the decolonization of the mind makes it imperative that English be brought down from its pedestal. He advocates the translation of European literary works into Nigerian languages although does not endorse choice of the Nigerian languages as the most suitable for the national language because of its linguistically dense nature.

Educational Implication

Although it can be argued that Nigeria does not have a language policy, the fact that it has a language policy in education which treats the three "major" Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as potential national languages which are to be developed and taught all through the formal educational system is unarguable. The adoption of English as a national language will undoubtedly strip these three "major" indigenous languages of their constitutional recognition, and the implication is that studying them in school will be discouraged. There will eventually be no teachers to teach them, and the nation will gradually lose literacy in the three languages, which are already suffering from negative attitudes among learners.

Conclusion

The fact is, language and society must always interrelate and for the society to functionally grow especially in a multilingual society, a single and common language must be adopted. Thus, linguistic situation heightened with the adoption of English in the Nigerian society is very challenging. The implication of its adoption is a reality faced by the society and its users.

The English language has so far enjoyed a pride of place in Nigeria and has also planted indelible marks that can be seen in all spheres of the society. Its negative implications though exist cannot be compared to the positive implications that allows its continuous usage. It is necessary to see its adoption as a second language from the positive end but its adoption as a national language has more negative implications which may result to a total loss of identity either as an individual or the society at large.

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