

THE HEGEMONY OF ENGLISH IN A GLOBALISING WORLD: IMPACT ON THE INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES SPOKEN IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of the hegemony of English, as a common lingua franca, referred to as a global language, on the indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria. Since English, through the British political imperialism and because of the economic supremacy of English dominated countries, has assumed the position of a global language, the impact is felt directly on the smaller indigenous languages in the areas or societies. The situation in Nigeria is a case in point and calls for attention. One of the problems identified in globalisation is the issue of the protection of minority languages or languages which do not have international base. In Nigeria, the use of the indigenous languages is of little significance having been dominated and their functions taken over by English, even when the language policy of the country is at variance with this. The hegemony of English as a global language calls attention to the protection of the indigenous languages spoken therein. This study which uses a descriptive approach is based on the view expressed in the literature that in a linguistically plural world, the linguistic rights of every language should be respected. The paper concludes by advocating respect and full development of all languages as well as striking a balance between meeting the intercommunication needs of different groups of people and maintaining linguistic diversity by preserving the indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria.

Keywords: English, Hegemony, Indigenous Languages, Nigeria

Introduction

One of the problems globalisation tries to solve is that of interconnectedness; economic, technological and communication interconnectedness. To do this effectively, requires that all should understand one another regardless of the linguistic groups that they come

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from. In the face of globalisation, the scale of communication is increasing from being merely state and regional to continental and even world-wide; involving a restructuring of the communication patterns. With the advancement in communication technologies, the use of internet and access to Web, in spite of breaking the limits of physical proximity, there is still the problem of understanding one another in the face of increased contact and interrelations regardless of the linguistic group. Since there is no effective structures for a world-wide round table discussion on the general problem, individuals, organisations, states, regions and countries resolve their communication needs with the outside world in the manner most convenient to them.

The economic and technological importance of English-speaking countries and their political supremacy make people, organisations, societies and countries adopt the language in order to resolve their intercommunication needs. It is in effect the language used most often for relations between different linguistic groups and the most habitual language (permitting different varieties) used in international, scientific and commercial communication.

The hegemony of English is reflected in the dominant role it plays over the other languages even though it is not taken as a global language in its entirety. It is usual to believe that a language achieves a genuinely global status, when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country. Having such a status, the global language has to be of a great importance, influencing all domains of the human activity in the world. This is however, not true of English. Its global nature stems from its being at the centre of international activity. The global nature of English, according to Crystal (2003) is not in the population of its speakers or in the roles it plays in the countries, but in the economic development of Britain which has begun to operate on a global scale, supported by new communication technologies and fostering the emergence of massive multinational organizations. It includes making impact in the growth of competitive industry, crossing national boundaries with electromagnetic ease. According to Crystal (2003): its global status accrues from the fact that:

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Britain had become the world's leading industrial and trading country. British political imperialism had sent English around the globe, during the nineteenth century, so that it was a language 'on which the sun never sets'. During the twentieth century, this world presence was maintained and promoted almost single-handedly through the economic supremacy of the new American super power. Economics replaced politics as the chief driving force. And the language behind the US dollar was English.

English encompasses more than just a convenient means of communication amongst the globe's citizens and dominates the economic, scientific, cultural, literal and cyberspace in the world today. In most states,

regions, organisations and countries that have adopted English, the elites in such societies and communities, according to Boada (2002), are adopting it as their habitual language and passing it on to their children as a first language, thinking of the economic and symbolic advantages. This has sparked off the process of language shift within certain social layers whose behaviour are being copied by larger groups of the society; leading to the progressive general abandonment of the use of the language(s) spoken in the small societies.

In Nigeria, the globalisation wave and the hegemony of English, in view of the dominant position it occupies in the national life of the people, makes it expedient for most people to desire to learn and speak English. Its domain and frontiers have continued to expand beyond the officially approved limits into areas that were the exclusive reserve of the local languages. Speakers of these languages not only want to fit into the globalisation outfit but see their languages as inferior. The result is that they no longer want to pass their local languages to their children. The adverse consequence of this is enormous.

The issue at the centre of this study is how to strike a balance between the preservation of the indigenous languages occasioned by linguistic pluralism and created by linguistic diversity, while at the same time maintaining the intercommunication needs between these groups of linguistically diverse individuals in this era of globalisation.

The Term Globalisation

The term globalisation could be seen in varied forms. In one sense, it relates to modern means of communication with the incredible speed that are interconnected in a common world, (Adamo, 2006). It means the increasingly active and conscious interaction of human activities in different parts of the earth. Globalisation can be seen in terms of power domination of the west and the proliferation of new information technologies.

The notion that humanity is gradually becoming one single community is also seen as globalisation. While we do not intend to go into the varied definitions of globalisation, we would just be content as far as this paper is concerned, to see the term globalisation as a process of reducing geographical distance by interconnecting the world through modern communication and speed. It implies opening out beyond local and nationalistic perspectives, to a broader outlook of an interconnected and inter-dependent world, with free transfer of capital goods and services across national frontiers involving too, political contexts of hegemony (Bertolissi, 2009).

The impact of globalisation is varied and seen on every facet of life. One of such impacts is on the dominance and spread of some languages across the world as well as the abandonment of the smaller languages. The impact of globalisation is on the restructuring of the communication pattern such that languages that have regional dominance within the context of process of economic integration emerge and spread to regions where it becomes

dominant, while smaller ones lose some functions, become threatened and some eventually go out of existence.

The Hegemony of English

English is assumed to be the most widely used language for international and intercultural communication. Its dominant spread is seen in the fact that it spans across several countries of the world with great number of speakers, even though there are conflicting reports on the number of speakers. Ammon (1992) claiming as high as 1.5 billion speakers; 340 million by Berns, Brot and Hasebrink (2007) approximately 450 million by the World Internet Statistics, the language has many speakers and has the widest spread. According to Berns et al (2007), with the wave of globalisation of the world's economy, there is an accompanying increase in the spread of English. The latest estimates of the percentage of people using major language groups in the outline provided by the World Internet Statistics (2008) are, English with approximately 450 million users, followed by Chinese with approximately 320 million and Spanish with approximately 129 million users.

The use of English runs across many countries of the world more than the other international languages. This does not however imply that English has the greatest number of speakers. Chinese has an approximately 875 million speakers and the official language of 3 nations; followed by Hindi 370 million speakers and the official language of 2 nations. English comes 4th in the chart with an estimate of approximately 340 million and spoken in 67 nations, (Berns De Brot Hasebrink, 2007). In addition, the economic and technological supremacy of Britain and America is brought to bear on the language.

English encompasses more than just a convenient means of communication among the world's citizens. It is the dominant language in the publishing industry. Mélitz (n.d) reports that authors writing in English have a much better chance of their works being translated than those writing in other languages. In addition, more literary works are more likely to be translated to English than to other languages. Those who write in English reach a wider audience than those writing in other languages. In the area of auditory and audiovisual entertainment, the use of English dominates. The language dominates the economic, cultural and cyberspace in the world today. It is the language of tourism, of markets and trade, and of internet. English is also the working language in the United Nations Organization (UNO).

The Linguistic Situation in Nigeria

The hegemony of English is also felt in Nigeria. English is the official language of Nigeria. It has economic, educational, political, cultural and sociolinguistic status in the country, (Bamgbose, 1995). Nigeria, with a population of over 140 million people, according to the 2006 census, has over 450 indigenous languages spoken within its borders (Adegbija, 1997;

Grimes, 2000). This is besides English (the official language) and Nigerian pidgin existing alongside. The multilingual situation in Nigeria is such that in many states of the country, several languages are spoken. The language policy of the country, in principle, is such that it encourages multilingualism. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria supports the use of the three major languages, namely, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba at the National Assembly. It emphatically states in section 55 of the 1999 Constitution that:

The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English and in Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made therefore (1999 Constitution Chapter V section 55).

The constitution also recognises and encourages the use of indigenous languages in the states' houses of assembly as the members may by resolution approve. The support given to the use of the indigenous languages is also contained in the National Policy on Education, NPE (2004). The policy regarding language(s) for educational purposes encourages and supports the use of a child's mother tongue (indigenous language(s)) or language of the immediate community in pre-primary education and the first three years of primary education. It states specifically in section 2.14c that:

The medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community; and to this end will:

- (i) develop the orthography of more Nigerian languages and,
- (ii) produce textbooks in Nigerian languages (NPE 2004).

The policy also states in section 4.19 e and f that:

The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject. From the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French taught as subjects.

In spite of all the official support given to the use of the local languages and the multilingual nature of the country, English continues to be hegemonic in Nigeria, influencing most sociolinguistic domains and every facet of the Nigerian environment in different dimensions. In the educational dimension for most localities especially the heterogeneous localities, English remains the sole means of instruction at all levels. This is coupled with the fact that a credit pass in English is required at the secondary school certificate level to gain admission to any tertiary institution, especially the universities to study any course, a requirement which was restricted in the past to courses in the humanities and humanities related.

The relevance of English at the educational dimension has a direct bearing on the social dimension. The language has permeated every aspects of the social life, to the extent that speaking English even in ethnic gatherings has become a symbol of social status. The high premium placed

on English at the school levels has necessitated the poor use of the indigenous languages in most homes. Most parents no longer see the need to pass on their indigenous languages to their children. This has led to raising children who can speak only English and in some cases Nigerian pidgin as well. Anyanwu (2011) also made this point in a study on the linguistic situation in the Warri metropolis of south-south Nigeria.

In the political dimension, English is used for deliberation in the National Assembly and states' houses of assembly. Even though provision was made in the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria for local languages to be used for deliberations as members may by resolution approve, this is not realized in practice. The fear by those who speak the minority languages has always been that of ethnic dominance, also implying cultural dominance, if any of the major languages is chosen. Dada (1987), reports that a bill for the implementation of the constitutional provision that Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo should be used in the National Assembly failed because of protests from the others who do not speak these languages. Similarly, Bamgbose (1996) observes that in the revision of the 1979 constitution, speakers of the minority languages walked out of the Constituent Assembly when a motion was made proposing that Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo should be designated national languages and be taught as compulsory subjects in all primary and secondary schools. The motion was however, withdrawn for lack of consensus; and so it has remained till this day that English continues to be used as the language of deliberation.

The hegemony of English has also influenced the cultural life of Nigerians. This is reflected in the values attached to the indigenous languages and the cultures they represent, as well as the social values. The cultural life that encourages the use of indigenous languages in Nigeria has been eroded by urbanisation. The influence of English on the cultural life is also reflected in certain ways of life related to everyday living. Bamgbose (1995) observed that the influence of English is matched by the adoption of certain ways of life relating to modes of dressing, food, architecture, table manners, entertainment, sports, the legal system, etc. Even though these are not bad in themselves, the culture and the language they represent continue to play dominant role in Nigeria. The hegemonic role English plays in Nigeria has reduced the local languages to subsidiary levels. In most spheres, the local languages are seen and treated as second class languages, not fit to be used but only fit to be talked about. Most people see these languages as fit to be used only amongst people who do not have the knowledge of English. In spite of the majority/minority dichotomy, (Oyetade, 2003), that the languages in Nigeria, has been classified into, the so called majority ones still have very limited domain of use. Currently, apart from Hausa and Yoruba, no other indigenous language extends beyond the borders of Nigeria. While Hausa, a lingua franca in the northern part of Nigeria, has extended up to Niger, Yoruba, a lingua franca in the south-west, has extended to the border areas of the Republic of Benin. The use of these languages in these areas is to enhance trading activities. However, in the borders of Niger and Republic of Benin, English provides an equal substitute

as those who do not speak any of these local languages can still communicate with people from different linguistic groups.

It is fashionable now in Nigeria for parents to relate to their children in the home, in English, believing that it is the language that will be of a greater economic benefit to them, even when both parents come from the same ethnic group. The uneducated parents also, who are not proficient in English, communicate with their children in the home in Nigerian pidgin believing that it is at least closer to English which offers better opportunities than the indigenous languages (Anyanwu, 2011). The result therefore is that the local languages in Nigeria are threatened by the hegemony of English.

A language is threatened, and could also be endangered, when it is not passed on to the new generation of children. This is the position of most languages in Nigeria today. Oyetade (2004) reporting on language endangerment in Nigeria observes that out of the over 500 languages spoken in Nigeria, 10 are already extinct, and so many are at the verge of extinction while quite a number of them are being threatened. Earlier, in a study by Blench (1998), on the languages spoken in the area around the Niger-Benue confluence of Nigeria, 24 languages are threatened while 11 are already extinct. In a report by Shimzu (1978), on a survey of the southern Bauchi group of languages in Nigeria, out of the 62 languages covered by his survey, 80% are no longer passed on to the younger generation. Oyetade (2004) also reports on the threat posed to the Akpes Cluster of Akoko languages on the south-west Nigeria and reports on the dominant role of Yoruba and the likelihood of these languages being extinct in the near future. Mowarin (2004), also reports on the threat posed to Urhobo by the onslaught of Nigerian pidgin. Anyanwu (2011), discussing multilingualism in Warri metropolis in south-south Nigeria is of the view that within the next 50 years the three indigenous languages spoken in the area would have been extinct, giving way to Nigerian pidgin.

Even though in all of these cases, the languages are being threatened by a more prestigious Nigerian language, the situation remains the same as all the languages in Nigeria are being threatened by one language or the other, most of them by the world's lingua franca, English, and others by the major languages of the area. Nationally, all the languages are being threatened by English, being a language looked up to as it ultimately places one in a class and leads to communication with the outside world. The language policy of Nigeria enshrined in the NPE (2004) and the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, concerning the use of the indigenous languages in education and in deliberation at the Houses of Assemblies, are not being respected. In all of these cases and in actual practice, English remains the dominant language.

In view of all these, we have to recall the universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights of (1996), which is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of (1948). This declaration recognises the right of every language no matter how small to exist as part of the Fundamental Human Right. The Declaration recognises the fact that linguistic rights are

fundamental human rights. It advocates that all languages are equal and that there should be respect and full development of all languages for a just and equitable linguistic peace throughout the world in the maintenance of harmonious social relations.

Conclusion

The study has X-rayed the hegemonic nature of English globally and in Nigeria. It has looked at the effect it has on the languages spoken in Nigeria. It tries to explain that even though the need for interconnectedness is relevant in view of the globalism operating today, there is still the need for linguistic diversity. Ways have to be sought to maintain linguistic diversity and intercommunication needs of different groups of people. The essence of maintaining the God-given linguistic diversity is first for the need to respect the linguistic and fundamental human rights of all. Second, to preserve the indigenous languages all over, especially those spoken in Nigeria. Since language is culture, and the alienation and abandonment of a language means the loss of the identity of the people and the cultures they represent, we make the following recommendations:

There should be the application of diglossia in the use of the languages. Recalling Ferguson's diglossia, where languages have different distribution which must be complementary, there should be a policy which will spell out the different functions of all languages. The need for an international discussion on the issue with a view to separating the functions of the languages through deliberate language planning exercise would be a wise decision. While the international global English and other international languages could remain for official purposes globally, and in the English language dominated countries, the indigenous languages could be used for other purposes besides the official ones. In this case, there will be no room for ethno linguistic conflict or any language being abandoned.

This situation is what Boada (2002) calls the "Principle of Subsidiarity". This is a political and administrative principle which could be adopted into language policy. The import of this principle is that it establishes a criterion that "whatever a local language can do, a global language should not". The operation of this principle would allow and promote the effective function of the indigenous languages. The functions of the indigenous languages should be exclusive and specific to prevent their functions being overpowered. The penalty for such an act by anybody or organization should also be spelt out. With this, the languages would be organised around a certain type of functional distribution enabling the continued poly-glottisation of individuals and the maintenance of all languages in Nigeria.

Another recommendation that could also be useful for maintaining interconnectedness in communication while at the same time giving the indigenous languages in Nigeria opportunity to exist and be functional, is that suggested by Tsuda (n.d), called "linguistic localism". This encourages the use of the local language(s) of the area where ever an international conference is hosted, making provision for translators and interpreters.

Another step that could be taken to promote the indigenous languages in Nigeria is to encourage the language owners to be loyal to their languages. The immediate preservation of a language first lies in the hands of the owners of the language. Apart from government policies, the only people who can prevent the language from being lost are the owners of the language themselves. Emenanjo (1999) emphasizes that one of the conditions that makes language endangerment easy is absence of language loyalty. People should cultivate the habit of speaking their languages to one another, not only in the confines of their homes, but in such gatherings as religious, political, economic, social and educational circles. With these steps taken, the hegemony of English in Nigeria would be reduced and linguistic pluralism maintained.

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