

Forms and Functions of  
ENGLISH AND  
INDIGENOUS  
LANGUAGES IN NIGERIA

A FESTSCHRIFT IN HONOUR OF

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**Introduction**

Banjo (1979:8) writes:

We may at this point pose the question: what, as informed observers, should be our attitude to the many social and geographical varieties of English that have sprung up in Nigeria? We must begin by saying that every single variety has a right to exist, for it would not be there if it were not sustained by a sociolinguistic reality. When that reality vanishes, we may, without having to do anything about it expect that variety to vanish. *Our main concern should be, not with the numerous micro-settings... in which the English language is used in the country, but with the macro-setting of inter-ethnic communication and national action.* (Emphasis ours).

We presume that the quotation above provides an appropriate base for an assessment of the current status of English use and usage in Nigeria, vis-à-vis its numerous varieties and functions, and a possible review of the present position of scholars on the issue. Arising from the quotation, four main questions immediately come to mind here which we shall attempt to address in this paper:

- (i) How has Nigerian English been characterized?
- (ii) What status does English have and what functions does it serve in an English-dominant multilingual society, Nigeria?
- (iii) What status and functions of English are relevant in a >complementary= English plus indigenous mother tongues bilingual Nigerian context?
- (iv) What effects can a change from an English-dominant multilingual perspective to a complementary English - mother tongues bilingual perspective have on the character and characterization of English in Nigeria?

While the first question prepares the ground for a review of the perception of scholars about the numerous varieties of English in Nigeria, as recorded in the existing literature on the subject, the second and third questions prompt a

discussion of the need to reassess the status and functions of both English and other Nigerian languages, within a restricted macro-social context. The last question then invites a discussion of the effect of changes in status and functions of English on the characterization of the language.

## 2. English in the Context of Societal Bilingualism

The distinction made between micro- and macro-setting by Banjo (1979) in the opening quotation in this paper is parallel to that between 'individual' and 'societal' bilingualism in sociolinguistics (Fishman, 1966, Stewart, 1968). In the context of 'individual bilingualism' or 'societal multilingualism', English is learnt sequentially as a first, second, third, or even fourth, language by different individuals, whereas there are also many monolingual or multilingual Nigerians who may not speak the language at all. Also, in terms of uses, the language serves several formal and informal purposes for individuals depending on the multifarious micro- and macro-social settings. For example, it may be used for academic purposes, for accommodation and integration, to show off, to raise one's status, create social distance between speaker and listener, to acquire further knowledge and to acquire modernity.

However, in the context of societal bilingualism, the characterization of English in terms of its learning and use situation is less cumbersome. For example, English is tagged as a second language (ESL) in Nigeria, irrespective of the sequence of learning by individuals, because of the official and national roles assigned to it. Also, the typical Nigerian bilingual is assumed to have acquired a mother tongue such as Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba, which serves as the primary means of communication before learning English for secondary use.

Societal bilingualism provides a base for national rather than personal considerations. In this regard, the focus of English learning and use in the context is geared towards enhancing the achievement of national goals, viz. democracy, unity, peace, international cooperation, promotion and preservation of positive cultural values and socio-economic and technological development (*Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, Section 13ff*). From all indications, it seems apparent that the sociolinguistic means of attaining these goals can be harnessed through the efficient learning and effective use of English alongside indigenous Nigerian languages both for the promotion of attainment of functional literacy in the general citizenry and for the mass mobilization of the citizens for social development. What this means is that appropriate roles will be assigned to English and the indigenous languages, whereby the total language resources of the nation are well

organized and utilized to fulfill the objectives above. Also, following this perception of the societal bilingual context in Nigeria as 'stable', rather than 'transitional', the promotion of 'additive', rather than 'subtractive', bilingualism must become of paramount consideration at this point.

## 3. The Characterization of English in Nigeria

Several attempts have been made by scholars to characterize and codify Nigerian English and the need to further intensify research in these areas has been expressed (Bamgbose *et al.*, 1995). Three major considerations are crucial for such intensification. The first consideration pertains to the identification of (sub) varieties of Nigerian English, while the other two pertain to what aspects of the language to cover and the data collection procedure.

### 3.1. Varieties of English in Nigeria

Bamgbose (1971) describes the reality of English language in multilingual Nigeria by observing that there are several varieties in Nigeria, which range from something very near Standard English to the patois of the market place. Many scholars have also described Nigerian English and characterized the varieties from various perspectives, geographical (regional and ethnic), social, and sociolinguistic and register studies (Salami 1968, Banjo 1971 and 1995, Adekunle 1974, papers by Adeniran, Adesanoye and Adetugbo in Ubahakwe (ed.) 1979, Akere 1982, Jibril 1986, Odumuh 1987 and Afolayan 1987 and 1991). Although some classifications by some scholars might have been too broad and unhelpful, e.g. the distinction made in regional terms between 'Northern' and 'Southern' English, some other classifications made have usefully served one purpose or the other. Akindele and Adegbite (1999:17-18, 145-146) summarize the classifications as follows:

- Ethnic: Hausa English, Igbo English, Yoruba English, etc.
- (a) Social: Educated/Standard versus Non-educated/Non-standard
- (b) Sociolinguistic:
  - (i) English as Second Language (ESL), as against English as Mother Tongue (EMT) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL)
  - (ii) Bilingual English (as against Monolingual or Multilingual English).
- (c) Register: Technical, Literary, Interactional; Formal v. Informal (Official v. Personal); Bookish v. Interactive; and Spoken v. Written).

The initial attempt to describe Nigerian English was based on data that were

wieldy and non-selective. The collection procedure was non-discriminatory because it lumped together correct and incorrect forms of the language that were produced in diverse educated and non-educated sources and the analysis was done within the descriptive framework of native speakers= English (e.g. Prator 1968, Quirk *et al.* 1972). Little wonder then why scholars characterized Nigerian English as an >interference= variety and regarded all features that deviated from British English as errors (Salami 1968). A later perception of the Nigerian English variety from a multilingual ESL perspective later prompted an identification of >inclusive= and >exclusive= usage of Nigerian English, whereby >exclusive= refers to only Standard English features while >inclusive= covers both standard and non-standard features (Banjo 1995).

Although it is sometimes important to describe both the non-standard and standard features for sociolinguistic and pedagogical reasons (Bamgbose 1995), it is nevertheless essential to separate the non-standard forms from standard features when the focus of study is the codification of Nigerian English. When Professor Randolph Quirk and others set out to describe the grammar of British English (see Quirk, *et al.* 1972), the database for their model was 'educated English' and not 'English in the market place' or a mixture of the two. Otherwise, no tangible results could have been achieved from a description of defective or mingled data. It is for this reason, therefore, that the suggestion is being made that English be nurtured in Nigeria as an ESL variety, a discipline and an applied linguistic policy for development (Afolayan 1987, 1991 and 1995).

### 3.2. *Aspects of the Description of Nigerian English*

Bamgbose (1995) and Banjo (1995) state the aspects of English that have to be covered and indeed are being considered by language scholars in the description of Nigerian English as 'linguistic' (Bamgbose 1971 and 1992; Jibril 1982 and 1986; Kujore 1985 and 1993; Obanya *et al.* 1979; Odumuh 1984), 'pragmatic' (Bamgbose 1971, Adetugbo 1979a and 1979b, Akere 1984, Awonusi 1994) and 'creative' (Adejare 1992, Johnson 1981 and Osundare 1979). It is our view in this paper that, not only should researches continue in all these areas, but also such researches are to be conducted within the framework suggested by Afolayan above.

In characterizing Nigerian English as an ESL variety, the variety has to be 'nativized' in such a way that its standard features can accommodate not only features that are adjudged correct by LMF standards (e.g. Br. E. or Am.E) but

and acceptable to the international (World) English audience (Adeniran 1979, Afolayan 1987, Bamgbose 1995, Banjo 1995). Bamgbose (1995:26) observes that although scholars (Kujore 1985, 1995; Bamgbose 1992 and Bokamba 1992) have extensively discussed features of standard Nigerian English, there is yet no standard reference work to turn to for what constitutes correct and acceptable usage in Nigerian English.

With regards to ESL as a discipline, the major concern is how the aspects of the variety mentioned above will be catered for in the teaching of English language in the school system, in terms of components and methodology. The components suggested by Afolayan (1979:13) are: (a) the 'practice' or 'Use of English', comprising the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing; (b) the English language component, concerned with the description of structures and theories about the language; and (c) the literature in English component, comprising English, African and other non-African literature in the language. On methodology, Adegbite (2000 and 2003a) suggests a 'sequential' bilingual approach that is learning-centered and encourages 'participatory' and 'collaborative' teaching and learning to make pupils achieve communicative competence.

Lastly, concerning ESL as an applied linguistic policy for development, Afolayan (1995:126-127) suggests that two vital steps need to be taken, viz. accepting the ESL policy as a national ideology and spelling out the ESL policy goals. The goals suggested by Afolayan (*ibid.*) are as follows: (i) optimum realization of bilingualism-biculturalism at all levels of education; (ii) assignment of crucial and well-defined roles to the individual citizen's mother tongue as well as the English language; and (iii) the primacy of the mother tongue. This falls in line with the discussion in this paper, which focuses on the need for a proper delimitation of the roles of English vis-à-vis the indigenous Nigerian languages before the language can be well characterized. A proper delimitation of roles of English as well as the cautious and selective characterization of standard features of the language should provide the bases for the production of reference work(s) required on Nigerian English.

### 3.3. *Data Collection Procedure*

It is expedient to emphasize the need to streamline the data collected for the description of different varieties of Nigerian English. The sampling method for each variety must be determined by the context and goal of the description. In the light of this, a description of Standard Nigerian English ought to be based on cautious and selective data collected from educated usage in, especially,

description. In the light of this, a description of Standard Nigerian English ought to be based on cautious and selective data collected from educated usage in, especially, formal contexts of communication; for example, at the national (this includes official communication at top governmental levels, in elitist organizations and in advanced educational institutions in the country) and international levels.

#### 4.0. A Delimitation of the Status and Functions of Nigerian English

A major factor, and perhaps the greatest problem, militating against the codification as well as efficient and effective learning and use of English in Nigeria is the non-delimitation of its functions vis-à-vis the indigenous languages. Several features of usage offer themselves for consideration from unrestricted domains of communication in terms of personal and official communication (in diverse idiolects and sub-dialects) in different settings (e.g. home, school, office or village, town, city, state, nation). As has already been stated in this work, no proper codification, acquisition or utilization of Nigerian English can take place in the absence of a well-defined socio-contextual framework.

From a general sociolinguistic perspective, the diverse roles that languages play in a society can be classified domain-wise as official and personal. In the light of this, English has been assigned primarily to perform official functions in Nigeria, while it serves personal functions secondarily. On the contrary, the indigenous languages serve personal functions primarily and are restricted from serving official functions. Whereas, from a more coordinated (i.e. stable and additive) bilingual viewpoint, the roles of the indigenous languages can become complementary to English in the performance of official roles, while users have the freedom to choose either English or indigenous languages or a code mixing of both in personal communication, based on individual preferences and communication purposes. The relevance of the latter suggestion to Nigeria's socio-political environment, especially with respect to the performance of official functions, is discussed below.

Five levels of geo-political significance can be identified in democratic Nigeria for the official usage of English. These are:

- (a) The International Community
- (b) The Nigerian nation
- (c) The Sub-national communities<sup>3</sup>
  - (i) Regions (East, West and North / East, West, Mid West and North)

- (iii) States (36 plus the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja)
- (d) The Local Government Areas - 772, plus six Area Councils in Abuja.
- (e) The Local Government Wards.

At each level in >a-e= above, English currently plays a formal role as the primary official language; whereas, the suggestion is that the language ought to serve as the primary official language at only Levels >a= and >b= and, occasionally, in the linguistic minority areas under Level >c= (i.e. multilingual regions, zones or states), while it serves a secondary official function in the monolingual areas under Level >c= (e.g. monolingual states, zones or regions) and at Levels >d= and >e=. An illustration of the suggestion made above is presented in the table below:

Table 1: Official Functions of Languages at Politico-geographical Levels in Nigeria

Languages	Functions	National	Zonal	Local
English	Primary	✓	MB, SE, SS	—
	Secondary	—	NW, NE, SW	✓
Indigenous Languages	Primary	—	NW, NE, SW	✓
	Secondary	✓	MB, SE, SS	—

An explanation of the presentation above is that English will be used primarily by Nigerians for international (e.g. at the UNO, OAU and ECOWAS meetings) and in inter-ethnic communication (e.g. at the National Assembly, National Council of States, Federal High Court and other Federal institutions), while the indigenous languages are used primarily at the intra-ethnic level (e.g. the States' Houses of Assembly and other States' institutions). Indeed, the consideration of English usage at all for official communication at the ward and local government levels is rational on the grounds that the messages of such communication are sometimes intended to extend beyond those areas.

Having clearly defined the official status of English in Nigeria, one issue that needs resolution is that of the variety (ies) of usage, i.e. should official communication at the levels above be carried out in standard English or not? Most scholars would agree that the official and formal usage of English demands the standard English form, especially because the variety meets the criteria of grammaticality, wider intelligibility and acceptability required for wide area communication. With regards to the written mode of English, the appropriateness of World Standard English (WSE) as the target of Standard Nigerian English (SNE) here seems unquestionable and we support the general

wide area communication. With regards to the written mode of English, the appropriateness of World Standard English (WSE) as the target of Standard Nigerian English (SNE) here seems unquestionable and we support the general view of scholars that the SNE should serve as the pedagogical model for developing English as a discipline in the educational system. However, in the case of spoken SNE, some valid issues have been raised against the wholesale applicability of WSE (see Adetugbo 1979b). Adetugbo (1979b: 181) observes that:

In fact, the highly educated Nigerian English speaker is bidialectal in English: he uses a distinctly Nigerian variety with fellow Nigerians and another variety, which he tries to approximate to RP for international communication.

The target of English studies in Nigeria, therefore, is to achieve communicative competence in SNE. In reality, some non-standard features might be tolerated at lower levels of national communication (e.g. Levels >c-e=) from the performance of the not so highly educated users of English; but strict adherence to the standard code is expected at the higher levels (Levels >a= and >b=).

This narrows down the concept of Standard Nigerian English to Educated English usage at the national (i.e. official communication in cosmopolitan advanced educational institutions) and international levels. Furthermore, it is expected that the educated Nigerian user in this regard is a coordinate bilingual who understands the linguistic and cultural nuances of both the mother tongue and second language.

### 5.0. Conclusion

The English language represents a part of the history and politics of Nigeria's existence, even as a sovereign nation. Thus, it might not be possible to wish it away easily. Since, as it might seem, the language has come to Nigeria to stay and to play vital official roles in the life of the nation, it behoves Nigerians to adapt and develop the language in order to utilize its rich resources for national development. As the standard form of a language normally wears the garb of its identity, the codification of SNE inevitably becomes a major activity in this process of language development.

Furthermore, the context of stable and additive bilingualism also dictates that the development of English language should not be based on the condition

languages, and make it perform functions that are better performed by the latter, it would also be a futile exercise to deny the language of the opportunity of performing the national and official roles appropriate to it.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> 'Stable' bilingualism refers to a bilingual situation whereby two languages are maintained for a lengthy period of time, while 'transitional' bilingualism takes place when a bilingual group reverts to monolingualism.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Additive' bilingualism refers to a bilingual situation which results in the acquisition of both mother tongue and second language skills, while 'subtractive' bilingualism results in the loss of mother tongue skills while paying greater attention to learning and using the second language (Lambert 1978)

The initial creation of the three regions of East, North and West in Nigeria in 1960 was based on geographical consideration, i.e. the natural courses of the Rivers Niger and Benue. An additional region, Mid-West, was carved out of the Western Region in 1963, which then brought the number of regions to four. The number of zones, states and local governments listed here refers to political territories created between 1995 and 1996. Note, however, that territories created in the colonial and post-colonial periods are of varying sizes and composition: some mono-ethnic, some multi-ethnic and some supra-ethnic.

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