Inaugural Lecture Series 199

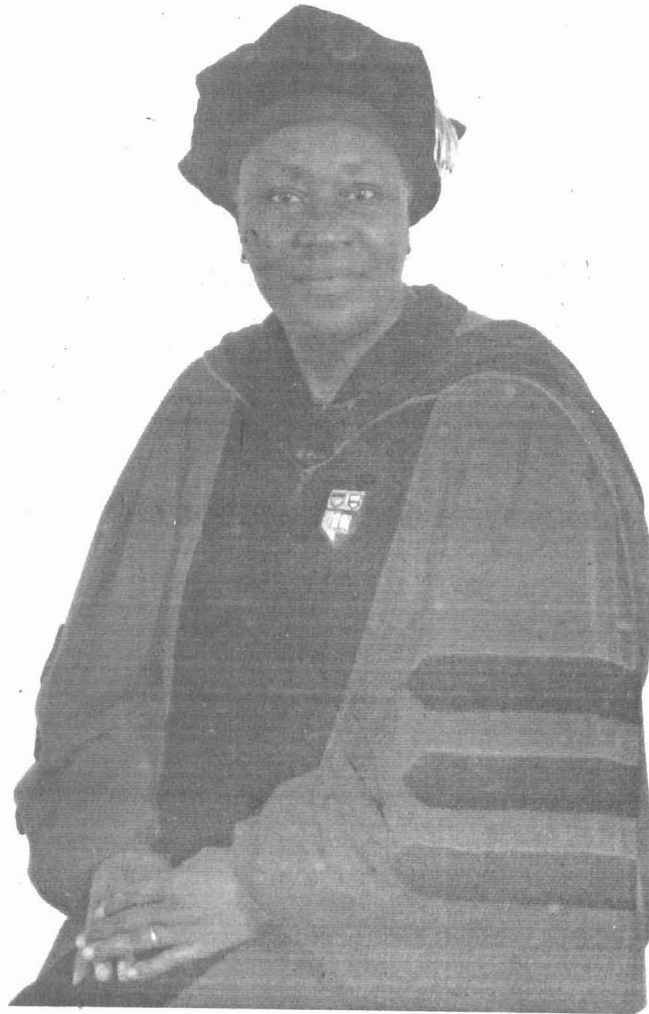# LANGUAGE MATTERS: EXPLORING THE DIMENSIONS OF MULTILINGUALISM

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Introduction: Babel and Thereafter

Toute la terre avait une seule langue et les mêmes mots. (Français)

Alle Welt hatte nur eine Sprache und dieselben Laute. (Deutsch)

Gbogbo ayé sì ní èdè kan, òrò wón sì jé òkan náà. (Yoruba)

> *Now, the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."*
>
> *But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."*
>
> *So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel – because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world."* (Genesis 11: 1-9)

Babel was the point at which language became an issue in the history of the human race, and it must be recognised as marking the

beginning of the age-old enterprise of foreign language learning. Up until then, not much thought would have been given to language issues, since everybody spoke one and the same language. No-one needed to buy a bilingual pocket dictionary to travel abroad; the profession of translators and interpreters was most certainly inexistent; and neither did language serve as a marker of identity, so that no wars could have been fought on the basis of racial and linguistic strife. After Babel, however, and the confounding of human language, the *language question* became a major component not only of interpersonal relationships, but a reality that is played out, at times in rather violent dimensions, among ethnic groups and even entire nations.

Probably nothing has contributed as much to fostering the mentality of *"Us"* versus *"Them"* among human beings as the fact of people not speaking the same language. That is, difference at the level of the language spoken is construed as being almost as impregnable as the erstwhile Berlin Wall, and leads people to define their identities in very exclusive terms. It is interesting, by the way, to see up to which point languages are considered to be different from one's own. For instance, it probably might not be inconceivable to imagine an Ibadan man refusing his daughter's hand in marriage to an Ijebu suitor, giving as part of his reason: *"We don't speak the same language"*! Of course, a whole lot of other cultural considerations equally come into play in such circumstances; however, there is no doubt that language plays a vital role. If identity questions are being raised at such levels, is it any surprise that they are being played out, with more dire consequences, at higher levels? One only needs to recall the holocausts and the genocides that the world has known to comprehend the grievousness of identity construction in exclusive terms, which Amin Maalouf, a French-Arab writer, characterises as "murderous identities" in the title of his very insightful book, *Les identités meurtrières* (Grasset, 1998).

If speaking a different language is usually seen as a barrier separating human beings and susceptible of leading to fundamental misunderstanding and, ultimately, war, then learning another person's language should be

seen as an act of constructing a bridge across that divide and a means of establishing, promoting or restoring good *entente* among the peoples of the world. It is in recognition of this fact that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), in 1993, set up a "Forum of Reflection" (hereafter referred to as the Forum) to: "reflect on the role of the UNESCO in this final decade of the of the 20th century and to identify the new tendencies which could inspire the organisation in the coming decade" (page 1 of the Forum's report). Upon completion of its assignment, the Forum arrived at certain conclusions and made several recommendations, among which was the following:

> "…[T]hat it is primarily in education that a
> viable solution can be found to most of the problems
> which the human race is currently faced with… [and
> the UNESCO was therefore advised] to concentrate
> its energies in the coming years primarily on education
> and, in particular, the education of young people."
> (UNESCO 1993:1)

One major aspect of this education, according to the Forum, should be the knowledge of other languages, and it therefore urged "*an introduction to the plurality of languages*, religions and cultures" as well as "the development of programmes of exchange for young people which would provide them with experience of another language, another culture, another vision of the world" (UNESCO 1993:3).

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, many universities around the world have taken this recommendation seriously and have made foreign language learning an important component of their students' training. Unfortunately, this has not been the case in our own University, although we have often argued in favour of such a move and made representations to the appropriate organs of the institution. It is true that the overwhelming majority of educated Nigerians (of Africans, in general) are bilingual, speaking not only their mother tongues but also the languages of their former colonial masters in which they have been schooled; still there is no reason for

Nigerians to limit themselves to English as their only international language. French is an obvious foreign language choice for all Nigerians, important as it is in our sub-region and flanked on all sides as we are by French-speaking countries.

I propose to take this august assembly, with your permission, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, through the paths I have trodden in my engagement, first of all and more specifically, with the teaching and learning of French as a foreign language and, more broadly, with the fields of general and applied linguistics. Among the issues with which I have been concerned as a researcher, in very general terms, are the following: analysing varieties of linguistic phenomena; seeking more effective methods of teaching foreign languages and dealing with language learners' errors; and examining Africans as users of foreign languages.

I plan to summarise the work I have done – which are, basically, explorations of various dimensions of multilingualism – using as my broad framework the two semantic interpretations associable with the first half of my title. Mr. Vice-Chancellor, I hope that most of those in this hall today were able to discern the deliberate ambiguity in the title of my lecture. There are, actually, two interpretations available for the phrase "Language matters", as clearly illustrated by the two different ways in which they can be parsed in order to show their immediate constituents:

(a)   [[Language] NP [matters] NP] NP

(b)   [[Language] NP [matters] VP] S

In (a), what we have is a noun phrase (NP), made up of two separate noun phrases (or nouns), while (b) shows that we have a sentence (S) comprising a noun phrase and a verb phrase. Thus, (a) can be paraphrased as "Matters of language" or "Matters relating to language" while (b) is a declaration that (one's) language matters. I will therefore start by presenting a few matters of language – issues pertinent to the study of language – , and then go on to show, based on a consideration of

the language question in Africa, that the matter of language is an important one – that language matters.

Language Matters: Universal and Language-Specific Dimensions

The "plurality of languages" which resulted from the Babel enterprise meant that not only would people have to learn one another's languages for there to be communication among them, it also created a job for linguists who, somewhere down the line, started to study those languages. Differences among languages provide a vast amount of data for linguistic analysis.

The Prussian statesman and scholar, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) was described by the renowned American linguist, Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1949) nearly a century later, as having written "the first great book on general linguistics". He was referring to Humboldt's work on the *Kawi* language (old Javanese) which was published posthumously in 1936. In his linguistic work, Humboldt "stressed both the fundamental unity of language in general, and the diversity of the individual languages that were seen as shaping the intellectual life of different nations and societies" (Matthews 1997: 165). Here, then, is the double-edged sword of linguistic inquiry: on the one hand, languages are analysed, dissected, as it were, in order to reveal the extent of their similarity to one another; on the other, the dissection only serves to show more clearly the ways in which languages do indeed differ significantly from one another.

The first edge of the sword serves the purpose of linguistic universals – seeking to identify properties which are common to all (or at least, a majority of) languages. In this case, one may talk of "absolute" versus "relative" or "statistical" universals. The interest of the second is to so thoroughly dissect a particular language that its most intricate properties are brought to light and its specific genius uncovered. The writing of grammars for specific languages results from such efforts – detailing the sounds (phonemes) of the language as well as its phonological, morphological and syntactic processes.

To illustrate the level of analysis dealing with individual languages, let us return to the ambiguity pointed out in the first half of my lecture's title. What is demonstrated by the two interpretations is a certain property of the English language: namely, that the possibility of having bare nouns (noun phrases) qualify each other is a feature of the language, and in such instances the first noun takes on the function of an adjective – since adjectives are pre-posed in English. The condition attached to that position is that the noun that occupies it must be invariable and cannot bear the mark of a plural. Thus, since we do not say *reds cars, so it is impossible to say *trees tops; rather we say red cars and tree tops (treetops). Unfortunately, many Nigerians, in an effort to introduce some kind of incorrect logic, say and write *blocks industry (thinking that, after all, the industry produces more than just a single block!). This betrays a fundamental ignorance of the basic functioning of the English language, at least in this respect.

Now, when the title of this lecture is translated into French, we discover that no such ambiguity as that represented in (a) and (b) is manifested. The translator would have to make a definite choice between the two possible meanings, selecting the one that he or she feels is more appropriate in the given context. Structure (a) would be translated as *"Questions de langue"*, while (b) would have as its French equivalent something along the lines of *"La langue compte"* (language *counts*, meaning, it *matters*). Thus, the play on words which I am now exploiting would not be possible if I were giving this lecture in French.

Before anyone jumps to the conclusion, however, that English is here being touted as a more interesting and more structurally elegant language than French, let me hasten to say that linguists normally recognise what they call the 'genius' of each language. That is, every single language has its particular areas of specialisation, as it were, where it demonstrates some superior ability of expression, be it in terms of its lexical formations or at the level of morphological or syntactic realisations.

This is the reason, I believe, that every graduate student of linguistics registered at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, undergoes training, first and foremost, in general linguistics – the objective being to enable the student discover the genius of a variety of languages through the linguistic analysis of a wide range of phenomena. This training started me off, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, on the path of analysing linguistic phenomena in Yoruba, since graduate students were encouraged to work on their mother tongues as well, and it helped to develop analytical skills as well as provide confirmation or negative evidence for the theories and models coming out of the various schools of linguistic thought. Some of the term papers which were submitted for the courses taken in Phonetics and Phonology, Syntax and Semantics have ended up as publications in various journals and, subsequently, have opened to me a world of research in the area known as *African Linguistics*. This is the area in which I have worked with Professor Walter Bisang, my colleague and friend, and my host at the Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany, on the occasions when I was in that institution as an Alexander von Humboldt scholar. I must here express my profound appreciation for the very important contribution that the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation has made to my professional development.

Doing research on Yoruba language was challenging, particularly because I was dissatisfied with much of the analysis of linguistic phenomena in Yoruba that I came across. Specifically, I was interested in identifying the functions which particular elements performed in the language. However, many of the researchers working on Yoruba then seemed to have been more interested in investigating how data from Yoruba could be made to confirm the theories coming out primarily from the United States of America. I therefore looked elsewhere for a more appropriate and intellectually gratifying framework, and this I found in the work of a French linguist, Antoine Culioli, and his "theory of markers".

According to Culioli, "Language… is only accessible through texts, that is, through patterns of markers, which are themselves traces of

underlying operations" (Culioli 1990: 72). It therefore becomes important to examine what these patterns of markers are in each language and then to compare languages with one another so that an inventory of universal patterns and operations may be obtained. Culioli states further on this issue:

> Now, the goal is not to construct a universal grammar, but to re-construct, by a theoretical and formal process of a foundational sort, the primitive notions, elementary operations, rules and schemata which generate grammatical categories and patterns specific to each language. In short, the goal is to find invariants which found and regulate language activity, as this activity manifests itself through the meaningful configurations of different languages. (Culioli 1990: 72)

The appeal for me in this approach was that it went beyond the mere pinning of labels onto linguistic phenomena. For example, there had been some controversy over the category of adjectives in Yoruba. The question that researchers sought to answer then was whether the bolded items in *ó ga/o gùn/ótóbi/ó sanra* ('It is high/long/big/fat') are to be regarded as verbs or adjectives. Also, in discussing "focalisation" in Yoruba, a "focus particle" has long been identified and its uses in wh-questions and other "focus constructions" documented. However, the particle itself had not been the object of detailed analysis, and not much was known as to how it operated generally in the language. The kind of question I asked was why it was that only third person subjects are possible to the left of the focus particle **ni** (**èmi ni** versus ***mo ni**, to mean 'I am the one')? Also, why is **ni** incompatible with the High Tone Syllable? (Compare **Ayo ´wa** - 'Ayo came' and ***Ayo ´ni** - 'Ayo is the one').

I will not dwell much on this aspect of my research – after all, I am known more as a teacher of French and based in the Department of Foreign Languages. I must mention, however, that it has been a great source of satisfaction for me, as a linguist, to have been able to contribute to the study of the Yoruba language, my mother tongue, and not only to that of the foreign languages which I have acquired in the course of my education. I have also had the privilege of serving on the Editorial Board of one of the foremost journals in the discipline, the *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics.* A list of my publications is provided in the booklet for the information of anyone who might be interested in this aspect of my research.

Language matters: Applied Linguistics

The Washington Post reported, on January 6, 2006, that President George Bush had, on the previous day, announced plans to boost foreign language study in the United States, "casting the initiative as a strategic move to better engage other nations in combating terrorism and promoting freedom and democracy" (page A04). Foreign language teaching and learning have important consequences for global security!

The term "applied linguistics" refers to that branch of linguistics which seeks to apply the findings of linguistics to other disciplines. In practice, however, the term has come to be more closely associated with the teaching and learning of languages, both mother tongue and foreign. With regard to mother tongue acquisition, researchers have sought to account, for instance, for the incredible speed at which this is done and the high level of competence attained by three and four-year-olds. In other words, in spite of the fact that the data to which children are exposed is limited, yet they manage to arrive at a correct internal grammar of the language to which they are exposed in a relatively short time. This ability is evidenced in the fact that children are capable of producing correct sentences which they have never heard before; this, obviously, is because they have been able to correctly identify the language's grammar. It is this realisation that shifted the basis of contemporary linguistics from the behaviourist model of B. F. Skinner to the generative model proposed by Noam Chomsky, because a theory based on conditioning and reinforcement is hard pressed to explain the fact that almost every sentence that anyone speaks is novel – and is processed by its hearer without any difficulty.

In the case of children learning their first languages, even when they make some "mistakes" in their speech, these can actually be seen as further evidence of the kind of sophisticated processing and analysis of linguistic data which goes on in their minds. When a three year-old girl asks her mother, "*Mummy, are we in of milk?*" this logical error actually gives us more insight into English, showing that there is a purely fortuitous gap in the language. For if it is possible to be *"out of milk"* in the house, gap in the language. For if it is possible to be *"out of milk"* in the house, why does the language make it impossible for us to be "*in of milk*"?

Furthermore, research on first language acquisition has demonstrated more clearly the superiority of comprehension over production. In language learners in general, comprehension is ahead of production – that is, learners understand more than they can actually produce in the language they are learning. A three year old once told a researcher that her name was "Litha". The following conversation ensued:

- Litha?

- No, Litha.

- Oh, Lisa.

- Yes, Litha.

This demonstrates that perception and production do not go hand in hand; the child obviously perceived the difference between *s* and *th* in English, although she herself could not as yet produce the contrast.

Applied linguists have been greatly interested in studying child language acquisition because it serves as a vital point of contrast and comparison with the learning of subsequent languages and can inform how these are taught. For instance, given that comprehension is seen to be ahead of production in both child (L1) and adult (L2, L3,...) learning, this points us in the direction of a better understanding of human competencies and abilities in general. In particular, any theory of language would have to account for the two types of competence – that is, comprehension competence and production competence – and seek to account for the disparity between them.

We now turn our attention specifically to the learning of foreign languages, which is the primary area of interest I have pursued. In this respect, my research has been in two areas: one aspect has dealt with foreign language learning in a general manner, while other studies I have conducted have focussed more specifically on Africans as users of foreign (European) languages. Before going into this in detail, however, I would like to explore more directly the issue of multilingualism.

Pathways to Multilingualism

Strictly speaking, *bi*lingualism is different from *multi*lingualism. While the bilingual individual is one who is capable of operating effectively in two languages, the multilingual has mastered more. In this presentation, however, I have chosen to adopt multilingualism as a general term, given the fact of its growing reality around the world. I am certain that even in this assembly, a sizeable proportion would be found to speak more than two languages. Certainly, there are among us those who, along with English and Standard Yoruba, also speak Ife, Ondo or Ekiti, or Igbo speakers who have stayed long enough in this environment to acquire a level of competence in Yoruba that could put even some native speakers to shame. These are all multilingual people. And in my own case, while I have communicative competence in just four languages, my friend and colleague, Walter Bisang, is able to operate in more than double that number, involving both European and Asian languages. He has also set his heart upon learning Yoruba and has started to make significant progress in it.

The story of bilingualism is an interesting one, for the view used to be held that it caused retardation in children. The famous Danish linguist and professor of the English language, Otto Hans Jespersen, was said to have asked (rhetorically, from his point of view) whether any bilingual child had ever developed into a great artist, a poet or an orator. Leonard Bloomfield, another most influential linguist, took up Jespersen and sought to counter his position by providing a list of bilingual children who later became artists and great men and women of science. Happily, the contention has since been settled and, indeed, the pendulum seems to have swung

completely in the other direction. The widely accepted point of view now is that bilingual – and even multilingual – children actually develop more rapidly a certain kind of intelligence than monolingual ones.

Early bilingual education, it would be recalled, was advocated by the Renaissance humanists at the end of the 14th century – and this probably explains why the Europeans remain its most committed proponents (given that Renaissance humanism started in Florence, Italy). Reference was made earlier in this lecture to the 1993 decision by the UNESCO Forum of Reflection which advocated an exposure to a plurality of languages as a major component of the education of young people. However, about a decade and a half earlier, the European nations had agreed, during a meeting held in Strasbourg in 1979, that bilingualism was the only reasonable option for Europe, not only for the officials of the member states, but also for all their citizens (UNESCO 1980: 166)

Indeed, the Europeans have been leading the way, in more recent times, towards going even beyond bilingualism. In Europe, foreign language learning normally begins around age 11 and continues through an extended period of schooling. In recent years, what is being advocated is to pursue the development of proficiency in a third (L3) or even fourth (L4) language in the course of this foreign language education (Lavine 2001: 35-36). The need for multilingualism is growing, stemming from the continuing integration of the European community; that is, the Europeans in each country are realising that they need competence in several languages, even as they are being called upon to deal ever more closely with fellow Europeans in other countries. There are now twenty-eight member states in the European Union, with twenty-three official languages – causing the Union to spend four billion Euros yearly to meet its needs for translation and interpretation.

Even in the United States of America, which has a reputation of being a country of primarily monolingual speakers, the fact is that most of those who have attended school since the 1970s have had to learn, to varying degrees, one other language in addition to English. Of course, the choice of this second language (L2) is determined by various factors. While French was definitely the second language of choice in the 1970s and 1980s, there has been a clear shift to Spanish, based on the influx into the United States of Spanish-speaking peoples, especially into the states of Florida and California. Japanese and Chinese are also becoming increasingly popular, even as those nations have gained in international standing.

Finally, a group of people that is obviously characterised by bilingualism – and even multilingualism – is that made up of educated Africans. The reason for this is obvious: although we have our indigenous languages, they are not the languages in which we are schooled, given that the language of education in most African countries is that of the particular colonial power which ruled over any given country. It can therefore be said that we had bilingualism thrust upon us, forcefully. The matter of Africans as users of foreign languages will be explored in detail later on.

Learning to Speak in a Foreign Tongue

Those who did all their foreign language learning while they were children can consider themselves lucky, for that is when the process normally takes place in a relatively painless manner and yields the best results. Indeed, this is the reason that some linguists differentiate *acquisition* in the case of children from *learning* in that of adults. However, others maintain that both learning and acquisition do occur in the two cases, with acquisition representing the non-conscious assimilation of some aspects of the target language through a variety of means (for example, listening to the radio or television or interacting directly with native speakers of the language), while learning involves a conscious and deliberate attention directed at ensuring a proper understanding of aspects of the language, like its grammar, sound pronunciation, as well as phonological and morphological processes. Mostly, learning is structured and occurs primarily in the classroom.

The goal of the language teacher is to bring learners to a level of competence which approximates as closely as possible to that of the native speaker of the target language. Now, native speakers possess a vast

amount of knowledge on their language: the language's sounds and their correct pronunciation, how words are formed and stringed together to make sentences, affinities between words (that is, which words tend to occur together), idiomatic expressions and their specific meanings, and a great deal more. The challenge facing the adult foreign language learner is to arrive at correctly mapping onto words and structures in the target language concepts and expressions that have already been mastered in a first language. This challenge presents a terrain that is riddled with mines, and the learner cannot but get caught in them from time to time. The linguistic evidence that a learner has been caught in one of those mines are the errors they commit, and these are often (though not always!) a delight to applied linguists, for they provide the data needed for *error analysis*.

Errors show up at every level of language learning – phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and discourse/pragmatic – and many of them are rooted in the language(s) which the learner has already acquired. That is, we tend to transfer verbal behaviour from languages already acquired, and this linguists refer to as *interference*. Now, errors are not supposed to be permanent; they are normally a transient phenomenon, representing a stage of relative ignorance concerning specific distinctions made in the target language; as knowledge increases, errors are supposed to disappear. This is similar to a two year-old who refers to all four-legged animals as 'dog', only because that is the one he or she is most familiar with. As goats, cows and horses are repeatedly encountered and their names heard, those distinctions become incorporated into the child's language and the error disappears. Unfortunately, however, many language learners do not manage to overcome some of their errors. In such instances, we talk of the errors as having become *fossilised*.

Fossilisation is striking at the phonetic level; that is, it shows forth in the non-native pronunciation of the target language's sounds. This, coupled with non-native intonation, is what makes it possible for us to describe someone as 'having an accent'. Among the French students I have taught over the years, I have had to give up, much to my chagrin, on striving to get some of them to properly pronounce certain French

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phonemes. One of the most notorious is the dorso-alveolar fricative, ['], as found in 'bonjour', which is erroneously realised most often as [X], a phoneme which does not exist in French. To take an example which most of my audience would be able to relate to more easily, we are all aware that many English speakers from my part of the country find it impossible to pronounce the phoneme [t n] (which they realise as [n] or [s]) and the phoneme [v] (which is pronounced [f]). Thus, 'chief' is pronounced as [n i:f] or [si:f], and 'velvet' as [fâlfât]. When these non-native pronunciations are reinforced with non-native intonation, we have a case of a strong accent.

I have discovered that intonation is a much-neglected aspect of language teaching. Attention is simply not paid to the stress patterns and the rhythm of languages. French, for example, is a language which places a stress on the last syllable of a group of words, which one might call a 'breath group'. All the syllables preceding the stressed one are pronounced on a flat, monotonous tone, giving us, for example:

> *Quand je suis allée à l'hôpital 'hier, j'y ai rencontré mon ami 'Pierre.*

('When I went to the hospital yesterday, I met my friend Pierre.')

There are only two 'breath groups' in this sentence, with the accented syllables coming just before the comma and right at the end. When this pattern is not adhered to and the rhythm of another language is imposed on the target language, we have a very odd-sounding French indeed, one which literally grates the sensitive ear of the native speaker.

English is very different from French in this matter of stress for, apart from general patterns of intonation relating to questions, assertions, exclamations, etc., English words come with their own, pre-assigned stress patterns. That is why it is possible to have meaning distinctions based solely on stress in the language: 'import/im'port, 'record/re'cord, etc. One only needs to think back at the kind of English spoken by *Eleyinmi,* in the

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very popular 'Village Headmaster' television series, to understand how non-native speakers can – and do! – wreak havoc on foreign languages.

All these issues are constantly brought to bear on my own teaching, and this is the reason that I initiated the writing of a two-volume French teaching method – *Je démarre!, méthode de français pour débutants* (1997) and *J'Avance!, méthode de français, niveau II* (1999) – with two wonderful colleagues, Professor Yemi Mojola and Professor Tundonu Amosu. In the area of research on the learning of foreign languages by adults, however, I have been particularly concerned with the teaching of vocabulary, another neglected aspect of foreign language teaching. That is, while sentence structure, verb conjugation, tenses, etc., are clearly presented in a systematic manner in manuals, vocabulary, when it is dealt with at all, is usually limited to a presentation of word lists. And yet, it is generally known that errors involving lexical (or vocabulary) items are more grievous than those having to do with grammar, for native speakers report that lexical errors hinder communication more than grammatical ones. For example, when a learner of English says *I did not bought the book*, the intended meaning of the utterance is still communicated without difficulty. On the other hand, listeners will find it hard to understand what meaning a learner is seeking to convey with the utterance, *The man intercepted my idea.*

This research focus started with my doctoral dissertation (1988). Apart from the fact that errors of form were being studied far more than those of content or meaning, I also noticed that the approach to error analysis in the discipline was overwhelmingly contrastive in nature; errors were viewed primarily as a result of interference from the learner's first language. My contention was that focusing on the *source* of errors, which the transfer or interference approach does, prevents us from fully understanding the *nature* of the errors themselves, and neither does it lead to concise and well-articulated suggestions for language teaching. I therefore sought to direct attention to the *internal* workings of the target language itself, especially with regard to semantic clusters – groups of words sharing aspects of their meaning, frequently referred to as synonyms

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– through the "Lexical Disambiguation Model" for vocabulary acquisition which I proposed (1991). This is a model which would help English teachers, for example, to teach the distinctions between the semantic cluster comprising the items *wound, injure, hurt, damage.*

The Dimensions of Multilingualism in Africa

We come now to the second meaning attributable to the first half of the title of this lecture, namely, that language matters. Issues of language have to do directly with identity, and there is hardly any other continent in the world where these issues are confronted with as much passion as on the continent of Africa. This matter of language being a serious matter has also been a point of focus in some of my research – more so since the beginning of this new millennium.

The fact is that we, as Africans, are still trying to come to terms with the burden of our history – and for our specific purposes here, with the linguistic burden of our colonial history. A basic dilemma has to do with our experience of schooling. The case of Govan Mbeki (Prah 1998: xi-xii) may be typical of many educated Africans:

> In my days through primary school all the Xhosa I learned in the classroom was to recite a poem in Xhosa. It was only at secondary school that I was taught the grammar of the language. Through all my schooling days, therefore, Xhosa, my language, had little or no relevance to my education, except that when I pursued it to course II at University I failed it.

Along similar lines, Nelson Mandela described the great embarrassment he felt when the queen of Basutoland addressed him in Sesotho and he could not respond, which made her ask: "What kind of lawyer and leader will you be who cannot speak the language of your own people?"

These incidences are clearly understood in light of the fact that within the African educational system European languages, that is, the

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languages of the colonisers, were maintained as the sole languages of education during the colonial period. This means that European languages are not present on the continent in a neutral manner; they carry with them a great historical baggage accumulated right through the periods of enslavement and colonisation. However, what continues to be of great concern to many in Africa is the fact that even after independence not only are European languages still being maintained within the educational system, but very little is being done to develop African languages which had suffered over a century of neglect. This state of affairs is what Djité (2004: 1) refers to as "the most painful and absurd interface between Africa and the rest of the world": The fact that Africa is the only continent in the world in which language-in-education "is largely exogenous to the society it seeks to serve". It is only in recent times that mother tongue education is starting to be introduced in a few countries but, even then, it tends to be restricted mainly to the primary level of education. When it is taught beyond the primary school, it is usually treated as any other subject (Prah 1998: xii).

Attempts have been made in some countries, mostly former French colonies, to reverse the colonial language-in-education policies and give preference to local languages. In 1959, for example, Madagascar chose to make Malagasy the sole official language. However, the country found it extremely difficult to handle the rivalry between the different dialects and bring about standardisation (*Le Robert, dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, 1992: 29). French has, therefore, remained the *de facto* official language. Other countries chose different mixes of official bilingualism instead, depending on their particular historical and socio-political circumstances: Cameroon opted for French and English, Chad and Mauritania combined French with Arabic, while small and relatively monolingual countries like Burundi and Rwanda were able to have a local language (Kirundi and Kinyarwanda, respectively) co-exist with French as official languages.

In my opinion, the fact that the majority of educated Africans have been schooled in languages other than their own constitutes a significant psychological burden. Some researchers have suggested that this reality is

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responsible, at least in part, for the apparent failure of education in Africa. Thus Savané (1993) and Sonaiya (2004) suggest that a schism was created separating school life from the rest of everyday living: School in the colonial days was where you were forbidden to speak your own language, and forced to use only that of the colonial master. Of course, this meant that you could not truly be yourself in school, since you could not freely express your innermost feelings and ideas in a language you were still struggling to acquire. Your school experience was constantly an enactment of the statement credited to the Boer leader, Steyn, in 1913, that "the language of the conqueror in the mouth of the conquered is the language of slaves" (cited in Prah 1998: 2). As such, school must have been robbed of much of its meaning which, in turn, would have meant that a significant portion of the learning that was going on there was primarily by rote, as Savané (1993) points out, since its relationship to real life might not have been evident for most of the learners.

In a 2006 article I state that "the continued learning and use of European languages in Africa still poses considerable problems", and it is only with a proper understanding of the dynamics of this reality that the question of Africans as learners and users of European languages may be correctly dealt with. The same article also points out that this issue is one which preoccupies African literary writers to a significant degree. For example, Ngugi Wa Thiongo (formerly known as James Ngugi) finally abandoned the use of English as his medium of expression out of a deep conviction regarding the inability of this language to adequately express his thoughts and emotions: "I think English is only a stopgap; it will not be used always. It is not a language that expresses the people's culture. I see it as a temporary phenomenon that is dying" (Egejuru 1980: 54). He was obviously mistaken, for the use of English has continued to gain more ground on the continent as well as all around the world, although reservations might be expressed on the issue of standards.

Others who did not go as far as Ngugi still expressed feelings of alienation as a result of being constrained to use a language that was not truly theirs. Egejuru (1980) reports on interviews conducted with some

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African writers and states that many of them admit to using European languages out of compulsion, and not by choice. Camara Laye, for example, views foreign languages as being "indispensable as a means of communication with the outside world" (1980: 36), while Ousmane Sembène notes that in order to "get acquainted with universal literature I am obliged to use the French language which is my exile because deep down I exile myself when I use French" (1980: 39). This point is re-echoed in Prah (1998: 2) who says in respect of the language dynamics in Africa:

> It is in language that people find their mental home, their definitional relationship to the external world. What this also means is that people can hardly be themselves in an idiom in which they have difficulty understanding or expressing themselves. They can barely be creative and innovative in a language they have to struggle with in order to command expression.

For this reason, I have sought to probe the connection, in some of my research (2002, 2003, 2004) between the linguistic reality in Africa and the continent's seeming inability to fully develop and realise its potentials. It seems to me that we need to resolve and come to terms with this matter of our continued use of European languages, especially as it affects the practice and use of our own languages.

A New African Multilingualism

An issue which is now being raised more and more by researchers concerning European languages in Africa has to do with the status to be ascribed to the languages themselves. For example, 'new Englishes' have become an object of study as researchers are focusing attention on issues relating to the domestication or appropriation of the English language by non-native populations (see, for example, Pratt, Liam & Weber 1984, Bamgbose, Banjo & Thomas 1997). Similar studies are being carried out on French as well, and the case of Côte d'Ivoire has become a point of reference, because Ivorian French has now assumed the status of a language in its own right, in which case researchers speak of the "Ivorisation" of the French language (Boutin 2002). The usual blaming of the linguistic woes of the continent on the imposition of European languages is now being seriously questioned, causing Djité (2004: 9) to ask pointedly: "Is it indeed possible, nearly half a century on, to speak of the language of the former coloniser as being imposed?"

A new point of view is developing, and it identifies the linguistic problem in Africa now as having to do more with the neglect of our own languages rather than our continued use of foreign languages. The two are not mutually exclusive, and it is my considered opinion that we, as Africans, have greatly short-changed ourselves by expending our energies on the question of whether foreign languages should continue to be used or not, rather than ensuring that our own languages do not become endangered due to our neglect of them. In contrast to the attitude of Ngugi Wa Thiongo, already alluded to, is that of Chinua Achebe who declared: "I have been given this language, and I intend to use it." This is the reason that I have become an advocate of early bilingual education (Sonaiya 2006), so that comparable levels of competence may be attained in both mother tongue and second language, and the African may become a stronger and more confident player on the global scene.

Multilingualism, as we have shown, is a linguistic reality in Africa, for we have always had to learn the languages of other ethnic groups or varieties of other languages, as dictated by various kinds of exigencies. According to Djite (2004: 9):

> Language practices in this part of the world have always been marked by multilingualism. Language diversity and the necessity of communicating across language boundaries have always fostered a desire to learn the language of the neighbour, the language of the playground, the language of the marketplace... the language of the former coloniser, or popular varieties of this language, is very much part and parcel of this new multilingualism, and growing sections

of the speech communities now perceive this language as one of their own

Demographic changes around the world have been impacting language practices, forcing individuals to adopt new languages which serve different functions in their lives. Africans – and Nigerians in particular – are yet to fully exploit their natural capacity for learning languages, for we have often limited ourselves to our local languages. As such, we are not competitive enough in vying for international jobs which require competence in international languages. We are not strategic enough in our planning. As we speak, the government of the United States of America has identified Yoruba, among others, as one of the strategic languages whose teaching must be promoted in their country and they are committing the necessary resources to it. Mr. Vice-Chancellor, I wonder if the Nigerian government has set any machinery in motion to promote the learning of Chinese, in spite of the contracts worth billions of naira which are being signed with Chinese firms. As you very well know, Sir, our Department has already made contacts with the Chinese embassy, and we are hopeful that sometime in the not-too-distant future our Department will add Chinese to its program.

From the foregoing, it is clear that language matters. It matters very much in our perception of ourselves and of others – for example, the French language is primarily responsible for the reputation of French people as romantic. Language is the most important medium through which we relate with fellow human beings, and as such, is able to erect a wall between us and others or break down barriers which otherwise would be insurmountable. It might be the determining factor in whether we get the plum job our hearts desire or whether our relationship with a casual acquaintance would develop into a friendship or not.

Conclusion: A Linguistic War

In bringing this lecture to a close, I wish to, hopefully, delight this audience by drawing attention to the linguistic war which has been going between the English and the French. The French are forever worrying about the overwhelming influence of the English language in today's world, and they are constantly seeking, through the work of the 'Haut Comité de la langue française' (the High Commission for the French language) to banish from French all the English words which are invading their dear language: walkman, jumbo jet, meeting, parking, hamburger, etc. The committee members sit down for long hours, coining equivalents for these words. Well, an American got fed up with this constant linguistic assault from the French and decided to write a reply, from which I give you an excerpt:

> I, for one, refuse to simply lie back on my *chaise longue* and take this act of French aggression... What is at stake is nothing less than the linguistic balance of payments. If they are declaring war on Franglais, I say it is time for us to declare war on Englench... Who, after all, made us wear *lingerie* when our underwear was perfectly decent? Who turned our cooks into *chefs* and our dances into *ballets*? Where was it writ that a bunch of flowers had to become a *bouquet*? Or that toilet water had to be *cologne* let alone *perfume*? What was the *raison d'être* for turning a decent American tenderloin into a *chateaubriand*?

> What the French resent is not our imperialism but our democracy. We gave them McDonald's. They gave us *croissants*. We gave them the ice-cream cone. They gave us the *quiche*. The people who invented the very word *'élite'* simply have a gripe against mass culture. They cheerfully export the notion that the only proper clothing is their *couture* and the proper hairdo is their *coiffure* (which has absolutely to be done in a *salon*! – my addition). Then they complain about "le jeans"...

> If they want to ban Franglais, we will meet them at the beaches with boatloads of their own Englench... If they no longer attend le meeting, we shall no longer *rendez-vous*. If they make it *de rigueur* to eliminate Americanisms, we shall refuse to eat our apple pie *à la mode* and our

soupe du jour... And if the French decide to return to the old *laissez faire* in linguistics, well, they had better not call it *détente*.

(Heinle & Heinle, *Allô la France*, pp.183-184; 1985)

Go learn a foreign language. I thank you for your attention.

POSTSCIRPT

I remember...

... a young Irish lady who landed at St. Anne's School, Ibadan, in 1967 to teach French to a group of probably disinterested girls. Her name was Firinne Ni Chreachain. Little did she know that the fire of interest she sparked would lead to a lifetime of exploring and delighting in the discovery of all that the language of Molière has to unfold.

And I also remember...

... my mother, who wanted so much for her daughter to become a doctor, but was just as satisfied for her to become a doctor of languages – neither of them cared much for the sight of blood anyway!

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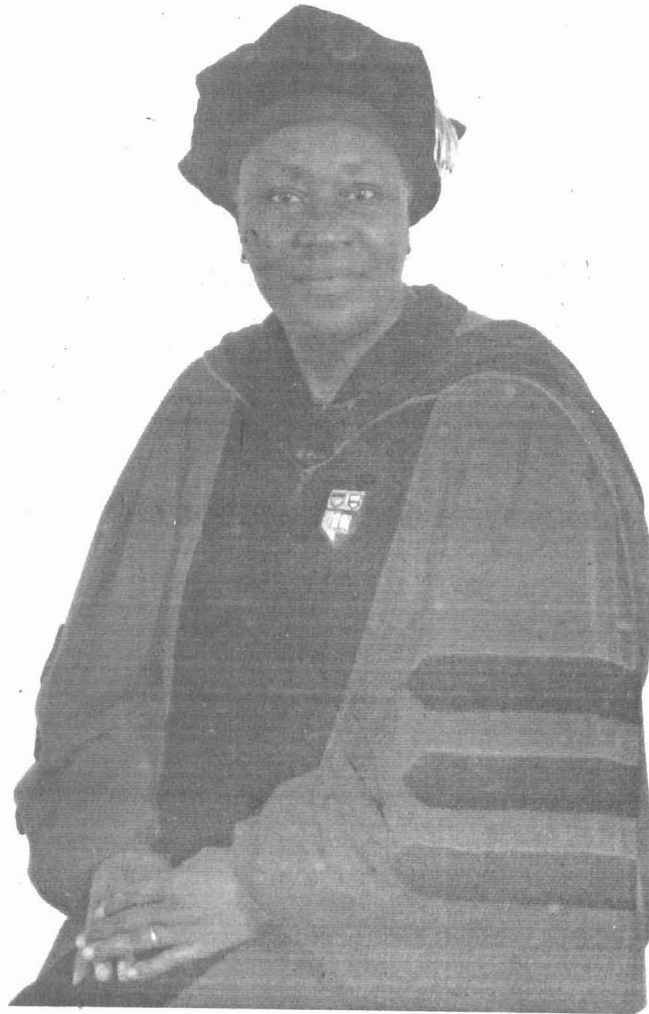
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LANGUAGE MATTERS: EXPLORING THE DIMENSIONS OF MULTILINGUALISM

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An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at Oduduwa Hall, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, On Tuesday, 27th February, 2007

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LANGUAGE MATTERS: EXPLORING THE DIMENSIONS OF MULTILINGUALISM

Introduction: Babel and Thereafter

Toute la terre avait une seule langue et les mêmes mots. (Français)

Alle Welt hatte nur eine Sprache und dieselben Laute. (Deutsch)

Gbogbo ayé sì ní èdè kan, ọ̀rọ̀ wọ́n sì jé òkan náà. (Yoruba)

> *Now, the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."*
>
> *But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."*
>
> *So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel – because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world."* (Genesis 11: 1-9)

Babel was the point at which language became an issue in the history of the human race, and it must be recognised as marking the

beginning of the age-old enterprise of foreign language learning. Up until then, not much thought would have been given to language issues, since everybody spoke one and the same language. No-one needed to buy a bilingual pocket dictionary to travel abroad; the profession of translators and interpreters was most certainly inexistent; and neither did language serve as a marker of identity, so that no wars could have been fought on the basis of racial and linguistic strife. After Babel, however, and the confounding of human language, the *language question* became a major component not only of interpersonal relationships, but a reality that is played out, at times in rather violent dimensions, among ethnic groups and even entire nations.

Probably nothing has contributed as much to fostering the mentality of *"Us"* versus *"Them"* among human beings as the fact of people not speaking the same language. That is, difference at the level of the language spoken is construed as being almost as impregnable as the erstwhile Berlin Wall, and leads people to define their identities in very exclusive terms. It is interesting, by the way, to see up to which point languages are considered to be different from one's own. For instance, it probably might not be inconceivable to imagine an Ibadan man refusing his daughter's hand in marriage to an Ijebu suitor, giving as part of his reason: *"We don't speak the same language"*! Of course, a whole lot of other cultural considerations equally come into play in such circumstances; however, there is no doubt that language plays a vital role. If identity questions are being raised at such levels, is it any surprise that they are being played out, with more dire consequences, at higher levels? One only needs to recall the holocausts and the genocides that the world has known to comprehend the grievousness of identity construction in exclusive terms, which Amin Maalouf, a French-Arab writer, characterises as "murderous identities" in the title of his very insightful book, *Les identités meurtrières* (Grasset, 1998).

If speaking a different language is usually seen as a barrier separating human beings and susceptible of leading to fundamental misunderstanding and, ultimately, war, then learning another person's language should be

seen as an act of constructing a bridge across that divide and a means of establishing, promoting or restoring good *entente* among the peoples of the world. It is in recognition of this fact that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), in 1993, set up a "Forum of Reflection" (hereafter referred to as the Forum) to: "reflect on the role of the UNESCO in this final decade of the of the 20th century and to identify the new tendencies which could inspire the organisation in the coming decade" (page 1 of the Forum's report). Upon completion of its assignment, the Forum arrived at certain conclusions and made several recommendations, among which was the following:

> "…[T]hat it is primarily in education that a viable solution can be found to most of the problems which the human race is currently faced with… [and the UNESCO was therefore advised] to concentrate its energies in the coming years primarily on education and, in particular, the education of young people." (UNESCO 1993:1)

One major aspect of this education, according to the Forum, should be the knowledge of other languages, and it therefore urged "*an introduction to the plurality of languages*, religions and cultures" as well as "the development of programmes of exchange for young people which would provide them with experience of another language, another culture, another vision of the world" (UNESCO 1993:3).

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, many universities around the world have taken this recommendation seriously and have made foreign language learning an important component of their students' training. Unfortunately, this has not been the case in our own University, although we have often argued in favour of such a move and made representations to the appropriate organs of the institution. It is true that the overwhelming majority of educated Nigerians (of Africans, in general) are bilingual, speaking not only their mother tongues but also the languages of their former colonial masters in which they have been schooled; still there is no reason for

Nigerians to limit themselves to English as their only international language. French is an obvious foreign language choice for all Nigerians, important as it is in our sub-region and flanked on all sides as we are by French-speaking countries.

I propose to take this august assembly, with your permission, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, through the paths I have trodden in my engagement, first of all and more specifically, with the teaching and learning of French as a foreign language and, more broadly, with the fields of general and applied linguistics. Among the issues with which I have been concerned as a researcher, in very general terms, are the following: analysing varieties of linguistic phenomena; seeking more effective methods of teaching foreign languages and dealing with language learners' errors; and examining Africans as users of foreign languages.

I plan to summarise the work I have done – which are, basically, explorations of various dimensions of multilingualism – using as my broad framework the two semantic interpretations associable with the first half of my title. Mr. Vice-Chancellor, I hope that most of those in this hall today were able to discern the deliberate ambiguity in the title of my lecture. There are, actually, two interpretations available for the phrase "Language matters", as clearly illustrated by the two different ways in which they can be parsed in order to show their immediate constituents:

(a)   [[Language] NP [matters] NP] NP

(b)   [[Language] NP [matters] VP] S

In (a), what we have is a noun phrase (NP), made up of two separate noun phrases (or nouns), while (b) shows that we have a sentence (S) comprising a noun phrase and a verb phrase. Thus, (a) can be paraphrased as "Matters of language" or "Matters relating to language" while (b) is a declaration that (one's) language matters. I will therefore start by presenting a few matters of language – issues pertinent to the study of language – , and then go on to show, based on a consideration of

the language question in Africa, that the matter of language is an important one – that language matters.

Language Matters: Universal and Language-Specific Dimensions

The "plurality of languages" which resulted from the Babel enterprise meant that not only would people have to learn one another's languages for there to be communication among them, it also created a job for linguists who, somewhere down the line, started to study those languages. Differences among languages provide a vast amount of data for linguistic analysis.

The Prussian statesman and scholar, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) was described by the renowned American linguist, Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1949) nearly a century later, as having written "the first great book on general linguistics". He was referring to Humboldt's work on the *Kawi* language (old Javanese) which was published posthumously in 1936. In his linguistic work, Humboldt "stressed both the fundamental unity of language in general, and the diversity of the individual languages that were seen as shaping the intellectual life of different nations and societies" (Matthews 1997: 165). Here, then, is the double-edged sword of linguistic inquiry: on the one hand, languages are analysed, dissected, as it were, in order to reveal the extent of their similarity to one another; on the other, the dissection only serves to show more clearly the ways in which languages do indeed differ significantly from one another.

The first edge of the sword serves the purpose of linguistic universals – seeking to identify properties which are common to all (or at least, a majority of) languages. In this case, one may talk of "absolute" versus "relative" or "statistical" universals. The interest of the second is to so thoroughly dissect a particular language that its most intricate properties are brought to light and its specific genius uncovered. The writing of grammars for specific languages results from such efforts – detailing the sounds (phonemes) of the language as well as its phonological, morphological and syntactic processes.

To illustrate the level of analysis dealing with individual languages, let us return to the ambiguity pointed out in the first half of my lecture's title. What is demonstrated by the two interpretations is a certain property of the English language: namely, that the possibility of having bare nouns (noun phrases) qualify each other is a feature of the language, and in such instances the first noun takes on the function of an adjective – since adjectives are pre-posed in English. The condition attached to that position is that the noun that occupies it must be invariable and cannot bear the mark of a plural. Thus, since we do not say *reds cars*, so it is impossible to say *trees tops*; rather we say *red cars* and *tree tops (treetops)*. Unfortunately, many Nigerians, in an effort to introduce some kind of incorrect logic, say and write *blocks industry* (thinking that, after all, the industry produces more than just a single block!). This betrays a fundamental ignorance of the basic functioning of the English language, at least in this respect.

Now, when the title of this lecture is translated into French, we discover that no such ambiguity as that represented in (a) and (b) is manifested. The translator would have to make a definite choice between the two possible meanings, selecting the one that he or she feels is more appropriate in the given context. Structure (a) would be translated as *"Questions de langue"*, while (b) would have as its French equivalent something along the lines of *"La langue compte"* (language *counts*, meaning, it *matters*). Thus, the play on words which I am now exploiting would not be possible if I were giving this lecture in French.

Before anyone jumps to the conclusion, however, that English is here being touted as a more interesting and more structurally elegant language than French, let me hasten to say that linguists normally recognise what they call the 'genius' of each language. That is, every single language has its particular areas of specialisation, as it were, where it demonstrates some superior ability of expression, be it in terms of its lexical formations or at the level of morphological or syntactic realisations.

This is the reason, I believe, that every graduate student of linguistics registered at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, undergoes training, first and foremost, in general linguistics – the objective being to enable the student discover the genius of a variety of languages through the linguistic analysis of a wide range of phenomena. This training started me off, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, on the path of analysing linguistic phenomena in Yoruba, since graduate students were encouraged to work on their mother tongues as well, and it helped to develop analytical skills as well as provide confirmation or negative evidence for the theories and models coming out of the various schools of linguistic thought. Some of the term papers which were submitted for the courses taken in Phonetics and Phonology, Syntax and Semantics have ended up as publications in various journals and, subsequently, have opened to me a world of research in the area known as *African Linguistics*. This is the area in which I have worked with Professor Walter Bisang, my colleague and friend, and my host at the Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany, on the occasions when I was in that institution as an Alexander von Humboldt scholar. I must here express my profound appreciation for the very important contribution that the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation has made to my professional development.

Doing research on Yoruba language was challenging, particularly because I was dissatisfied with much of the analysis of linguistic phenomena in Yoruba that I came across. Specifically, I was interested in identifying the functions which particular elements performed in the language. However, many of the researchers working on Yoruba then seemed to have been more interested in investigating how data from Yoruba could be made to confirm the theories coming out primarily from the United States of America. I therefore looked elsewhere for a more appropriate and intellectually gratifying framework, and this I found in the work of a French linguist, Antoine Culioli, and his "theory of markers".

According to Culioli, "Language… is only accessible through texts, that is, through patterns of markers, which are themselves traces of

underlying operations" (Culioli 1990: 72). It therefore becomes important to examine what these patterns of markers are in each language and then to compare languages with one another so that an inventory of universal patterns and operations may be obtained. Culioli states further on this issue:

> Now, the goal is not to construct a universal grammar, but to re-construct, by a theoretical and formal process of a foundational sort, the primitive notions, elementary operations, rules and schemata which generate grammatical categories and patterns specific to each language. In short, the goal is to find invariants which found and regulate language activity, as this activity manifests itself through the meaningful configurations of different languages. (Culioli 1990: 72)

The appeal for me in this approach was that it went beyond the mere pinning of labels onto linguistic phenomena. For example, there had been some controversy over the category of adjectives in Yoruba. The question that researchers sought to answer then was whether the bolded items in *ó ga/o gùn/ótóbi/ó sanra* ('It is high/long/big/fat') are to be regarded as verbs or adjectives. Also, in discussing "focalisation" in Yoruba, a "focus particle" has long been identified and its uses in wh-questions and other "focus constructions" documented. However, the particle itself had not been the object of detailed analysis, and not much was known as to how it operated generally in the language. The kind of question I asked was why it was that only third person subjects are possible to the left of the focus particle **ni** (**èmi ni** versus *mo ni, to mean 'I am the one')? Also, why is **ni** incompatible with the High Tone Syllable? (Compare **Ayo ´wa** - 'Ayo came' and *Ayo ´ ni - 'Ayo is the one').

I will not dwell much on this aspect of my research – after all, I am known more as a teacher of French and based in the Department of Foreign Languages. I must mention, however, that it has been a great source of satisfaction for me, as a linguist, to have been able to contribute to the study of the Yoruba language, my mother tongue, and not only to that of the foreign languages which I have acquired in the course of my education. I have also had the privilege of serving on the Editorial Board of one of the foremost journals in the discipline, the *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics*. A list of my publications is provided in the booklet for the information of anyone who might be interested in this aspect of my research.

Language matters: Applied Linguistics

The Washington Post reported, on January 6, 2006, that President George Bush had, on the previous day, announced plans to boost foreign language study in the United States, "casting the initiative as a strategic move to better engage other nations in combating terrorism and promoting freedom and democracy" (page A04). Foreign language teaching and learning have important consequences for global security!

The term "applied linguistics" refers to that branch of linguistics which seeks to apply the findings of linguistics to other disciplines. In practice, however, the term has come to be more closely associated with the teaching and learning of languages, both mother tongue and foreign. With regard to mother tongue acquisition, researchers have sought to account, for instance, for the incredible speed at which this is done and the high level of competence attained by three and four-year-olds. In other words, in spite of the fact that the data to which children are exposed is limited, yet they manage to arrive at a correct internal grammar of the language to which they are exposed in a relatively short time. This ability is evidenced in the fact that children are capable of producing correct sentences which they have never heard before; this, obviously, is because they have been able to correctly identify the language's grammar. It is this realisation that shifted the basis of contemporary linguistics from the behaviourist model of B. F. Skinner to the generative model proposed by Noam Chomsky, because a theory based on conditioning and reinforcement is hard pressed to explain the fact that almost every sentence that anyone speaks is novel – and is processed by its hearer without any difficulty.

In the case of children learning their first languages, even when they make some "mistakes" in their speech, these can actually be seen as further evidence of the kind of sophisticated processing and analysis of linguistic data which goes on in their minds. When a three year-old girl asks her mother, "*Mummy, are we in of milk?*" this logical error actually gives us more insight into English, showing that there is a purely fortuitous gap in the language. For if it is possible to be *"out of milk"* in the house, gap in the language. For if it is possible to be *"out of milk"* in the house, why does the language make it impossible for us to be "*in of milk*"?

Furthermore, research on first language acquisition has demonstrated more clearly the superiority of comprehension over production. In language learners in general, comprehension is ahead of production – that is, learners understand more than they can actually produce in the language they are learning. A three year old once told a researcher that her name was "Litha". The following conversation ensued:

- Litha?

- No, Litha.

- Oh, Lisa.

- Yes, Litha.

This demonstrates that perception and production do not go hand in hand; the child obviously perceived the difference between *s* and *th* in English, although she herself could not as yet produce the contrast.

Applied linguists have been greatly interested in studying child language acquisition because it serves as a vital point of contrast and comparison with the learning of subsequent languages and can inform how these are taught. For instance, given that comprehension is seen to be ahead of production in both child (L1) and adult (L2, L3,…) learning, this points us in the direction of a better understanding of human competencies and abilities in general. In particular, any theory of language would have to account for the two types of competence – that is, comprehension competence and production competence – and seek to account for the disparity between them.

We now turn our attention specifically to the learning of foreign languages, which is the primary area of interest I have pursued. In this respect, my research has been in two areas: one aspect has dealt with foreign language learning in a general manner, while other studies I have conducted have focussed more specifically on Africans as users of foreign (European) languages. Before going into this in detail, however, I would like to explore more directly the issue of multilingualism.

Pathways to Multilingualism

Strictly speaking, *bi*lingualism is different from *multi*lingualism. While the bilingual individual is one who is capable of operating effectively in two languages, the multilingual has mastered more. In this presentation, however, I have chosen to adopt multilingualism as a general term, given the fact of its growing reality around the world. I am certain that even in this assembly, a sizeable proportion would be found to speak more than two languages. Certainly, there are among us those who, along with English and Standard Yoruba, also speak Ife, Ondo or Ekiti, or Igbo speakers who have stayed long enough in this environment to acquire a level of competence in Yoruba that could put even some native speakers to shame. These are all multilingual people. And in my own case, while I have communicative competence in just four languages, my friend and colleague, Walter Bisang, is able to operate in more than double that number, involving both European and Asian languages. He has also set his heart upon learning Yoruba and has started to make significant progress in it.

The story of bilingualism is an interesting one, for the view used to be held that it caused retardation in children. The famous Danish linguist and professor of the English language, Otto Hans Jespersen, was said to have asked (rhetorically, from his point of view) whether any bilingual child had ever developed into a great artist, a poet or an orator. Leonard Bloomfield, another most influential linguist, took up Jespersen and sought to counter his position by providing a list of bilingual children who later became artists and great men and women of science. Happily, the contention has since been settled and, indeed, the pendulum seems to have swung

completely in the other direction. The widely accepted point of view now is that bilingual – and even multilingual – children actually develop more rapidly a certain kind of intelligence than monolingual ones.

Early bilingual education, it would be recalled, was advocated by the Renaissance humanists at the end of the 14th century – and this probably explains why the Europeans remain its most committed proponents (given that Renaissance humanism started in Florence, Italy). Reference was made earlier in this lecture to the 1993 decision by the UNESCO Forum of Reflection which advocated an exposure to a plurality of languages as a major component of the education of young people. However, about a decade and a half earlier, the European nations had agreed, during a meeting held in Strasbourg in 1979, that bilingualism was the only reasonable option for Europe, not only for the officials of the member states, but also for all their citizens (UNESCO 1980: 166)

Indeed, the Europeans have been leading the way, in more recent times, towards going even beyond bilingualism. In Europe, foreign language learning normally begins around age 11 and continues through an extended period of schooling. In recent years, what is being advocated is to pursue the development of proficiency in a third (L3) or even fourth (L4) language in the course of this foreign language education (Lavine 2001: 35-36). The need for multilingualism is growing, stemming from the continuing integration of the European community; that is, the Europeans in each country are realising that they need competence in several languages, even as they are being called upon to deal ever more closely with fellow Europeans in other countries. There are now twenty-eight member states in the European Union, with twenty-three official languages – causing the Union to spend four billion Euros yearly to meet its needs for translation and interpretation.

Even in the United States of America, which has a reputation of being a country of primarily monolingual speakers, the fact is that most of those who have attended school since the 1970s have had to learn, to varying degrees, one other language in addition to English. Of course, the choice of this second language (L2) is determined by various factors. While French was definitely the second language of choice in the 1970s and 1980s, there has been a clear shift to Spanish, based on the influx into the United States of Spanish-speaking peoples, especially into the states of Florida and California. Japanese and Chinese are also becoming increasingly popular, even as those nations have gained in international standing.

Finally, a group of people that is obviously characterised by bilingualism – and even multilingualism – is that made up of educated Africans. The reason for this is obvious: although we have our indigenous languages, they are not the languages in which we are schooled, given that the language of education in most African countries is that of the particular colonial power which ruled over any given country. It can therefore be said that we had bilingualism thrust upon us, forcefully. The matter of Africans as users of foreign languages will be explored in detail later on.

Learning to Speak in a Foreign Tongue

Those who did all their foreign language learning while they were children can consider themselves lucky, for that is when the process normally takes place in a relatively painless manner and yields the best results. Indeed, this is the reason that some linguists differentiate *acquisition* in the case of children from *learning* in that of adults. However, others maintain that both learning and acquisition do occur in the two cases, with acquisition representing the non-conscious assimilation of some aspects of the target language through a variety of means (for example, listening to the radio or television or interacting directly with native speakers of the language), while learning involves a conscious and deliberate attention directed at ensuring a proper understanding of aspects of the language, like its grammar, sound pronunciation, as well as phonological and morphological processes. Mostly, learning is structured and occurs primarily in the classroom.

The goal of the language teacher is to bring learners to a level of competence which approximates as closely as possible to that of the native speaker of the target language. Now, native speakers possess a vast

amount of knowledge on their language: the language's sounds and their correct pronunciation, how words are formed and stringed together to make sentences, affinities between words (that is, which words tend to occur together), idiomatic expressions and their specific meanings, and a great deal more. The challenge facing the adult foreign language learner is to arrive at correctly mapping onto words and structures in the target language concepts and expressions that have already been mastered in a first language. This challenge presents a terrain that is riddled with mines, and the learner cannot but get caught in them from time to time. The linguistic evidence that a learner has been caught in one of those mines are the errors they commit, and these are often (though not always!) a delight to applied linguists, for they provide the data needed for *error analysis*.

Errors show up at every level of language learning – phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and discourse/pragmatic – and many of them are rooted in the language(s) which the learner has already acquired. That is, we tend to transfer verbal behaviour from languages already acquired, and this linguists refer to as *interference*. Now, errors are not supposed to be permanent; they are normally a transient phenomenon, representing a stage of relative ignorance concerning specific distinctions made in the target language; as knowledge increases, errors are supposed to disappear. This is similar to a two year-old who refers to all four-legged animals as 'dog', only because that is the one he or she is most familiar with. As goats, cows and horses are repeatedly encountered and their names heard, those distinctions become incorporated into the child's language and the error disappears. Unfortunately, however, many language learners do not manage to overcome some of their errors. In such instances, we talk of the errors as having become *fossilised*.

Fossilisation is striking at the phonetic level; that is, it shows forth in the non-native pronunciation of the target language's sounds. This, coupled with non-native intonation, is what makes it possible for us to describe someone as 'having an accent'. Among the French students I have taught over the years, I have had to give up, much to my chagrin, on striving to get some of them to properly pronounce certain French

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phonemes. One of the most notorious is the dorso-alveolar fricative, ['], as found in 'bonjour', which is erroneously realised most often as [X], a phoneme which does not exist in French. To take an example which most of my audience would be able to relate to more easily, we are all aware that many English speakers from my part of the country find it impossible to pronounce the phoneme [t n] (which they realise as [n] or [s]) and the phoneme [v] (which is pronounced [f]). Thus, 'chief' is pronounced as [n i:f] or [si:f], and 'velvet' as [fȃlfȃt]. When these non-native pronunciations are reinforced with non-native intonation, we have a case of a strong accent.

I have discovered that intonation is a much-neglected aspect of language teaching. Attention is simply not paid to the stress patterns and the rhythm of languages. French, for example, is a language which places a stress on the last syllable of a group of words, which one might call a 'breath group'. All the syllables preceding the stressed one are pronounced on a flat, monotonous tone, giving us, for example:

> *Quand je suis allée à l'hôpital 'hier, j'y ai rencontré mon ami 'Pierre.*

> ('When I went to the hospital yesterday, I met my friend Pierre.')

There are only two 'breath groups' in this sentence, with the accented syllables coming just before the comma and right at the end. When this pattern is not adhered to and the rhythm of another language is imposed on the target language, we have a very odd-sounding French indeed, one which literally grates the sensitive ear of the native speaker.

English is very different from French in this matter of stress for, apart from general patterns of intonation relating to questions, assertions, exclamations, etc., English words come with their own, pre-assigned stress patterns. That is why it is possible to have meaning distinctions based solely on stress in the language: 'import/im'port, 'record/re'cord, etc. One only needs to think back at the kind of English spoken by *Eleyinmi,* in the

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very popular 'Village Headmaster' television series, to understand how non-native speakers can – and do! – wreak havoc on foreign languages.

All these issues are constantly brought to bear on my own teaching, and this is the reason that I initiated the writing of a two-volume French teaching method – *Je démarre!, méthode de français pour débutants* (1997) and *J'Avance!, méthode de français, niveau II* (1999) – with two wonderful colleagues, Professor Yemi Mojola and Professor Tundonu Amosu. In the area of research on the learning of foreign languages by adults, however, I have been particularly concerned with the teaching of vocabulary, another neglected aspect of foreign language teaching. That is, while sentence structure, verb conjugation, tenses, etc., are clearly presented in a systematic manner in manuals, vocabulary, when it is dealt with at all, is usually limited to a presentation of word lists. And yet, it is generally known that errors involving lexical (or vocabulary) items are more grievous than those having to do with grammar, for native speakers report that lexical errors hinder communication more than grammatical ones. For example, when a learner of English says *I did not bought the book*, the intended meaning of the utterance is still communicated without difficulty. On the other hand, listeners will find it hard to understand what meaning a learner is seeking to convey with the utterance, *The man intercepted my idea.*

This research focus started with my doctoral dissertation (1988). Apart from the fact that errors of form were being studied far more than those of content or meaning, I also noticed that the approach to error analysis in the discipline was overwhelmingly contrastive in nature; errors were viewed primarily as a result of interference from the learner's first language. My contention was that focusing on the *source* of errors, which the transfer or interference approach does, prevents us from fully understanding the *nature* of the errors themselves, and neither does it lead to concise and well-articulated suggestions for language teaching. I therefore sought to direct attention to the *internal* workings of the target language itself, especially with regard to semantic clusters – groups of words sharing aspects of their meaning, frequently referred to as synonyms

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– through the "Lexical Disambiguation Model" for vocabulary acquisition which I proposed (1991). This is a model which would help English teachers, for example, to teach the distinctions between the semantic cluster comprising the items *wound, injure, hurt, damage.*

The Dimensions of Multilingualism in Africa

We come now to the second meaning attributable to the first half of the title of this lecture, namely, that language matters. Issues of language have to do directly with identity, and there is hardly any other continent in the world where these issues are confronted with as much passion as on the continent of Africa. This matter of language being a serious matter has also been a point of focus in some of my research – more so since the beginning of this new millennium.

The fact is that we, as Africans, are still trying to come to terms with the burden of our history – and for our specific purposes here, with the linguistic burden of our colonial history. A basic dilemma has to do with our experience of schooling. The case of Govan Mbeki (Prah 1998: xi-xii) may be typical of many educated Africans:

> In my days through primary school all the Xhosa I learned in the classroom was to recite a poem in Xhosa. It was only at secondary school that I was taught the grammar of the language. Through all my schooling days, therefore, Xhosa, my language, had little or no relevance to my education, except that when I pursued it to course II at University I failed it.

Along similar lines, Nelson Mandela described the great embarrassment he felt when the queen of Basutoland addressed him in Sesotho and he could not respond, which made her ask: "What kind of lawyer and leader will you be who cannot speak the language of your own people?"

These incidences are clearly understood in light of the fact that within the African educational system European languages, that is, the

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languages of the colonisers, were maintained as the sole languages of education during the colonial period. This means that European languages are not present on the continent in a neutral manner; they carry with them a great historical baggage accumulated right through the periods of enslavement and colonisation. However, what continues to be of great concern to many in Africa is the fact that even after independence not only are European languages still being maintained within the educational system, but very little is being done to develop African languages which had suffered over a century of neglect. This state of affairs is what Djité (2004:1) refers to as "the most painful and absurd interface between Africa and the rest of the world": The fact that Africa is the only continent in the world in which language-in-education "is largely exogenous to the society it seeks to serve". It is only in recent times that mother tongue education is starting to be introduced in a few countries but, even then, it tends to be restricted mainly to the primary level of education. When it is taught beyond the primary school, it is usually treated as any other subject (Prah 1998: xii).

Attempts have been made in some countries, mostly former French colonies, to reverse the colonial language-in-education policies and give preference to local languages. In 1959, for example, Madagascar chose to make Malagasy the sole official language. However, the country found it extremely difficult to handle the rivalry between the different dialects and bring about standardisation (*Le Robert, dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, 1992: 29). French has, therefore, remained the *de facto* official language. Other countries chose different mixes of official bilingualism instead, depending on their particular historical and socio-political circumstances: Cameroon opted for French and English, Chad and Mauritania combined French with Arabic, while small and relatively monolingual countries like Burundi and Rwanda were able to have a local language (Kirundi and Kinyarwanda, respectively) co-exist with French as official languages.

In my opinion, the fact that the majority of educated Africans have been schooled in languages other than their own constitutes a significant psychological burden. Some researchers have suggested that this reality is

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responsible, at least in part, for the apparent failure of education in Africa. Thus Savané (1993) and Sonaiya (2004) suggest that a schism was created separating school life from the rest of everyday living: School in the colonial days was where you were forbidden to speak your own language, and forced to use only that of the colonial master. Of course, this meant that you could not truly be yourself in school, since you could not freely express your innermost feelings and ideas in a language you were still struggling to acquire. Your school experience was constantly an enactment of the statement credited to the Boer leader, Steyn, in 1913, that "the language of the conqueror in the mouth of the conquered is the language of 'slaves'" (cited in Prah 1998: 2). As such, school must have been robbed of much of its meaning which, in turn, would have meant that a significant portion of the learning that was going on there was primarily by rote, as Savané (1993) points out, since its relationship to real life might not have been evident for most of the learners.

In a 2006 article I state that "the continued learning and use of European languages in Africa still poses considerable problems", and it is only with a proper understanding of the dynamics of this reality that the question of Africans as learners and users of European languages may be correctly dealt with. The same article also points out that this issue is one which preoccupies African literary writers to a significant degree. For example, Ngugi Wa Thiongo (formerly known as James Ngugi) finally abandoned the use of English as his medium of expression out of a deep conviction regarding the inability of this language to adequately express his thoughts and emotions: "I think English is only a stopgap; it will not be used always. It is not a language that expresses the people's culture. I see it as a temporary phenomenon that is dying" (Egejuru 1980: 54). He was obviously mistaken, for the use of English has continued to gain more ground on the continent as well as all around the world, although reservations might be expressed on the issue of standards.

Others who did not go as far as Ngugi still expressed feelings of alienation as a result of being constrained to use a language that was not truly theirs. Egejuru (1980) reports on interviews conducted with some

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African writers and states that many of them admit to using European languages out of compulsion, and not by choice. Camara Laye, for example, views foreign languages as being "indispensable as a means of communication with the outside world" (1980: 36), while Ousmane Sembène notes that in order to "get acquainted with universal literature I am obliged to use the French language which is my exile because deep down I exile myself when I use French" (1980: 39). This point is re-echoed in Prah (1998: 2) who says in respect of the language dynamics in Africa:

> It is in language that people find their mental home, their definitional relationship to the external world. What this also means is that people can hardly be themselves in an idiom in which they have difficulty understanding or expressing themselves. They can barely be creative and innovative in a language they have to struggle with in order to command expression.

For this reason, I have sought to probe the connection, in some of my research (2002, 2003, 2004) between the linguistic reality in Africa and the continent's seeming inability to fully develop and realise its potentials. It seems to me that we need to resolve and come to terms with this matter of our continued use of European languages, especially as it affects the practice and use of our own languages.

A New African Multilingualism

An issue which is now being raised more and more by researchers concerning European languages in Africa has to do with the status to be ascribed to the languages themselves. For example, 'new Englishes' have become an object of study as researchers are focusing attention on issues relating to the domestication or appropriation of the English language by non-native populations (see, for example, Pratt, Liam & Weber 1984, Bamgbose, Banjo & Thomas 1997). Similar studies are being carried out on French as well, and the case of Côte d'Ivoire has become a point of reference, because Ivorian French has now assumed the status of a language in its own right, in which case researchers speak of the "Ivorisation" of the French language (Boutin 2002). The usual blaming of the linguistic woes of the continent on the imposition of European languages is now being seriously questioned, causing Djité (2004: 9) to ask pointedly: "Is it indeed possible, nearly half a century on, to speak of the language of the former coloniser as being imposed?"

A new point of view is developing, and it identifies the linguistic problem in Africa now as having to do more with the neglect of our own languages rather than our continued use of foreign languages. The two are not mutually exclusive, and it is my considered opinion that we, as Africans, have greatly short-changed ourselves by expending our energies on the question of whether foreign languages should continue to be used or not, rather than ensuring that our own languages do not become endangered due to our neglect of them. In contrast to the attitude of Ngugi Wa Thiongo, already alluded to, is that of Chinua Achebe who declared: "I have been given this language, and I intend to use it." This is the reason that I have become an advocate of early bilingual education (Sonaiya 2006), so that comparable levels of competence may be attained in both mother tongue and second language, and the African may become a stronger and more confident player on the global scene.

Multilingualism, as we have shown, is a linguistic reality in Africa, for we have always had to learn the languages of other ethnic groups or varieties of other languages, as dictated by various kinds of exigencies. According to Djite (2004: 9):

> Language practices in this part of the world have always been marked by multilingualism. Language diversity and the necessity of communicating across language boundaries have always fostered a desire to learn the language of the neighbour, the language of the playground, the language of the marketplace... the language of the former coloniser, or popular varieties of this language, is very much part and parcel of this new multilingualism, and growing sections

of the speech communities now perceive this language as one of their own

Demographic changes around the world have been impacting language practices, forcing individuals to adopt new languages which serve different functions in their lives. Africans – and Nigerians in particular – are yet to fully exploit their natural capacity for learning languages, for we have often limited ourselves to our local languages. As such, we are not competitive enough in vying for international jobs which require competence in international languages. We are not strategic enough in our planning. As we speak, the government of the United States of America has identified Yoruba, among others, as one of the strategic languages whose teaching must be promoted in their country and they are committing the necessary resources to it. Mr. Vice-Chancellor, I wonder if the Nigerian government has set any machinery in motion to promote the learning of Chinese, in spite of the contracts worth billions of naira which are being signed with Chinese firms. As you very well know, Sir, our Department has already made contacts with the Chinese embassy, and we are hopeful that sometime in the not-too-distant future our Department will add Chinese to its program.

From the foregoing, it is clear that language matters. It matters very much in our perception of ourselves and of others – for example, the French language is primarily responsible for the reputation of French people as romantic. Language is the most important medium through which we relate with fellow human beings, and as such, is able to erect a wall between us and others or break down barriers which otherwise would be insurmountable. It might be the determining factor in whether we get the plum job our hearts desire or whether our relationship with a casual acquaintance would develop into a friendship or not.

Conclusion: A Linguistic War

In bringing this lecture to a close, I wish to, hopefully, delight this audience by drawing attention to the linguistic war which has been going between the English and the French. The French are forever worrying about the overwhelming influence of the English language in today's world, and they are constantly seeking, through the work of the 'Haut Comité de la langue française' (the High Commission for the French language) to banish from French all the English words which are invading their dear language: walkman, jumbo jet, meeting, parking, hamburger, etc. The committee members sit down for long hours, coining equivalents for these words. Well, an American got fed up with this constant linguistic assault from the French and decided to write a reply, from which I give you an excerpt:

> I, for one, refuse to simply lie back on my *chaise longue* and take this act of French aggression… What is at stake is nothing less than the linguistic balance of payments. If they are declaring war on Franglais, I say it is time for us to declare war on Englench… Who, after all, made us wear *lingerie* when our underwear was perfectly decent? Who turned our cooks into *chefs* and our dances into *ballets*? Where was it writ that a bunch of flowers had to become a *bouquet*? Or that toilet water had to be *cologne* let alone *perfume*? What was the *raison d'être* for turning a decent American tenderloin into a *chateaubriand*?

> What the French resent is not our imperialism but our democracy. We gave them McDonald's. They gave us *croissants*. We gave them the ice-cream cone. They gave us the *quiche*. The people who invented the very word '*élite*' simply have a gripe against mass culture. They cheerfully export the notion that the only proper clothing is their *couture* and the proper hairdo is their *coiffure* (which has absolutely to be done in a *salon*! – my addition). Then they complain about "le jeans"…

> If they want to ban Franglais, we will meet them at the beaches with boatloads of their own Englench… If they no longer attend le meeting, we shall no longer *rendez-vous*. If they make it *de rigueur* to eliminate Americanisms, we shall refuse to eat our apple pie *à la mode* and our

soupe du jour... And if the French decide to return to the old *laissez faire* in linguistics, well, they had better not call it *détente*.

(Heinle & Heinle, *Allô la France*, pp.183-184; 1985)

Go learn a foreign language. I thank you for your attention.

POSTSCIRPT

I remember...

... a young Irish lady who landed at St. Anne's School, Ibadan, in 1967 to teach French to a group of probably disinterested girls. Her name was Firinne Ni Chreachain. Little did she know that the fire of interest she sparked would lead to a lifetime of exploring and delighting in the discovery of all that the language of Molière has to unfold.

And I also remember...

... my mother, who wanted so much for her daughter to become a doctor, but was just as satisfied for her to become a doctor of languages – neither of them cared much for the sight of blood anyway!

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