

# Enlightenment and Attitudes of the Nigerian Elite on the Roles of Languages in Nigeria

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This study describes the effect of enlightenment on attitudes of the Nigerian elite to the roles assigned to English and indigenous languages in Nigeria. From the results of a preliminary investigation into the attitudes of undergraduate students in a Nigerian University, it was presumed that enlightenment of citizens on the importance of indigenous languages *vis-à-vis* English in Nigeria might bring about a positive shift in their attitudes towards their mother tongues. The study then delves into available literature on enlightenment efforts and shifts in attitudes of Nigerians towards their indigenous languages and examines these issues in the wider context of language planning and national development. From all indications, it seems that, although a greater number of the elite class still do not have favourable dispositions towards their indigenous languages as they do towards English, the seed of the positive realisation of the complementary roles of indigenous languages and English in national development has been sown among a few Nigerians. What remains is for these few people to water this seed so that it can germinate and spread among all Nigerians in order to enhance collective participation towards national developmental efforts.

Research on language planning in Nigeria today has centred on both status and corpus planning. While the research on status planning has centred on the roles assigned to English and indigenous languages in Nigeria and attitudes of speakers to numerous languages (Adegbija, 1994; Akindele & Adegbite, 1999; Bamgbose, 2001), the corpus planning research has investigated the graphisation, standardisation and intellectualisation of indigenous languages, particularly the minority languages (Afolayan, 1979; Bamgbose, 1977; Emenanjo, 1990; Williamson, 1985). This study focuses on status planning, especially the effects of language attitudes on the assignment of roles to English and indigenous languages in Nigeria.

The over 400 languages in Nigeria have been categorised in different ways by scholars, based on the parameters of sequence of acquisition, number of speakers and roles assigned to languages. Considering the acquisition sequence, the following labels are recognised:

- (1) Mother tongues (i.e. indigenous languages): Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Edo, Efik, Tiv, Fulfulde, Kanuri, etc.
- (2) Second language: English
- (3) Foreign languages: French, Arabic and others.

The categorisation in terms of number of speakers and roles assigned to languages has provided us with the following labels:

- (1) Dominant language: English
- (2) Majority languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba
- (3) Minority languages: Angas, Edo, Efik, Tiv, Fulfulde, Kanuri, etc.

Awonusi (1993) describes the languages in terms of levels of importance as in Table 1. Also, Bamgbose (1993) describes the status of Nigerian languages using the following terms: dominant, deprived, endangered and dying. The dominant label matches the status of English in Nigeria. Apart from the generally positive attitudes that Nigerians have towards English, they tend to have a negative attitude towards indigenous languages other than their own (Adegbija, 1994; Babajide, 2001).

**Table 1** Status of languages in Nigeria

Status	Language(s)	Roles
Level V	English	National and international roles
Level IV	Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba	Regional lingua francas, used in network news
Level III	Pidgin English	Restricted lingua franca
Level II	Edo, Efik, Fulfulde, Idoma, Igala, Ijo, Kanuri, Nupe, Tiv	Ethnic languages used in network news
Level I	Other minor languages	Ethnic or sub-ethnic roles

The deprived languages refer to the three major indigenous languages in Nigeria, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. In spite of the relative advantage that the majority languages may have over the minority languages, in terms of the extent of their use for communication, it has been noted, that the former are hardly ever used beyond personal communication with family and friends. Indeed, many speakers of both majority and minority languages, most especially the latter, do not believe that their languages can be used for any serious conduct of modern day affairs (Adegbija, 1994; Igboanusi & Ohia, 2001).

The endangered languages are minority languages that are used very little or not used at all for communication. Crozier and Blench (1992) affirm that many of the smaller languages in Nigeria are already extinct or are very nearly extinct; an example is Bassa-Kontagora with only 10 speakers alive in 1989. Shaeffer (1997) further warns that Emai, spoken by a small community in Edo State and the 30 different languages spoken in the area would probably be dead by the year 2050 as none could serve as a lingua franca and they are being supplanted by other languages.

### Attitudes of Undergraduate Students

A preliminary investigation was carried out in November 2001 to examine the attitudes of some undergraduate students to the roles assigned to English and indigenous languages that serve as the mother tongues of various people of Nigeria. A total of 200 Part Three students of Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife were exposed to a set of lectures on a course entitled 'Multilingualism and National Development' offered by the Department of English in the university. The students were asked to respond to some questions in a questionnaire before and after the lectures were given. The questions sought

information about the language(s) they would prefer for personal communication, social interactions (e.g. city celebrations and festivals) and official transactions at the local, state and national levels. They were also requested to give reasons for their preferences. The responses before the lectures are presented in Table 2 showing the extent of their preferences in particular situations, in rounded up percentages. The languages involved here are English, Hausa, Igbo, minority groups' languages, Pidgin and Yoruba. The minority languages referred to are Edo, Idoma, Ijaw, Isolo, Kilma and Urhobo.

The presentation above shows that, before the lectures, all groups of students, except the Hausa, preferred English to their mother tongues for serving many of the roles listed. Historically, the Yoruba and Igbo ethnic groups were much earlier exposed to western education than the Hausa, while many Hausa indigenes see English as a tool or symbol of an alien culture, Christianity and religion. Being also predominantly Muslims, the Hausa promote the speaking of Arabic along with Hausa in several domains. Students from the minority groups showed the least interest in using their mother tongues beyond personal communication. In view of the smallness of their population and their absorption into communities dominated by the major ethnic groups, members of the minority groups end up learning and using the majority language(s) dominant in their communities, in addition to using English and Pidgin, while their interest in their own languages diminishes.

After the lectures, there was generally an apparent change in the response

**Table 2** Language preferences of undergraduate students

Hausa students	English	Hausa	
Personal communication	0	100	
Social communication (semi-formal)	20	80	
National official communication	60	40	
State official communication	25	75	
Local government official communication	10	90	
Igbo students	English	Igbo	Pidgin
Personal communication	25	55	20
Social communication (semi-formal)	40	50	10
National official communication	90	10	0
State official communication	75	25	0
Local government official communication	55	45	0
Yoruba students	English	Yoruba	
Personal communication	20	80	
Social communication (semi-formal)	30	70	
National official communication	80	20	
State official communication	70	30	
Local government official	50	50	
Minority group students	English	Mother tongue	Pidgin
Personal communication	10	50	40
Social communication (semi-formal)	50	15	35
National official communication	100	0	0
State official communication	65	10	25
Local government official communication	40	20	40

of students in favour of their mother tongues, to the extent that Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba students were, respectively, proposing their languages to assist English as official languages and minority groups' students recognising their languages at state level and even for social communication.

### Statement of the problem

The findings above might generate a presumption that the lectures have resulted in shifts in attitudes of students. But it is a fact that attitudes are not easily changed as their formations are based on deep-seated cognitive, emotive and social factors (cf. Baker, 1988). Thus, rather than embark on an experimental study in which just one or few enlightenment efforts are matched with reflections of attitudes, we prefer to take a more global perspective of using existing research reports and documentary evidence to describe how enlightenment in different forms and content could have influenced the activities (as a reflection of attitudes) of the elite in language planning and policy-making.

### Negative Attitudes to Indigenous Languages in Nigeria

The Nigerian elite has been blamed for the inferior status of indigenous languages compared with English (Oyesakin, 1992). Since it is the elite that dominate policy-making in Nigeria, the interest of the elite has always been equated with public interest. Consequently, the dominance of English over the indigenous languages in Nigeria and the attendant positive attitude towards the language can be attributed to elitist interests.

Ordinarily the masses could not have had negative attitudes towards their respective mother tongues if they had not been 'misled' or 'misdirected' by the elite whom the former look up to for direction. Despite the fact that English is spoken by less than 20% of Nigerians, the language has been made a *sine qua non* to the survival of individuals in the nation (Adeniran, 1977). Afolayan's (1999: 83) description of the positive attitudes of Nigerians to English is very apt here and we quote him as follows:

As ex-colonial people, Nigerians hold English in great awe. They so overrate English that literacy in English is considered the only mark of being an educated person. For example, for them science and technology are not within the reach of any person who cannot master the English language. Not surprisingly, therefore, the language, unlike any of the Nigerian mother tongues, is regarded as being politically neutral for adoption by people. Consequently, political expediency makes the English language the ready language for adoption for national literacy today. Indeed some Nigerians, desirous of having a head start in the drive for literacy with its attendant politico-socio-economic advantages are already striving to make it their family mother tongue.

Several reasons have been identified by scholars (Adegbija, 1994; Bamgbose, 2001; Oyetade, 2001) for the attitudes of Nigerians to languages in the country. Some of these are colonialism, elitism, ethnicism, mobility and job prospects, level of language development and lack of knowledge of the workings of language. Some observations made by scholars in respect of the above factors are briefly discussed below.

The attitude that recognises as normal the continued use of European languages in all advanced sectors of life shows that the Nigerian elite is plagued by linguistic imperialism (Ansre, 1975; Bamgbose, 1985). Oyetade (2001: 21) has rightly observed that many elite parents send their wards to fee-paying primary schools where the medium of instruction is English. This is predicated on the belief that the earlier a child begins learning in English, the higher his/her chances of better mastery of the language. This will ultimately guarantee good performance at the subsequent levels of education and eventually a good job. Some parents in the elite group go to the extent of banning their children from using their mother tongue at home even though both parents speak the same language. In certain schools, indigenous languages, pejoratively called 'vernaculars' are highly prohibited in preference for English.

This attitude of the elite has made the non-literate in society no less positively disposed towards English than their literate counterpart. Everybody, literate and non-literate, easily recognises the perceived importance of English as a prerequisite for a better condition of life. Thus, all parents have the desire to ensure that their wards are educated and speak English for their personal and family aggrandisement (cf. Oyesakin, 1992).

The inferior status accorded the indigenous languages is also reflected in the school curriculum where little time is devoted to the study of the languages in comparison with English. Some of the few teachers who teach the languages are not even qualified to do so. The low status accorded the indigenous languages in the educational system and the negative attitudes of parents already have repercussions on the interest of their children. Oyetade (2001: 24) shows that applicants for language courses in Nigerian universities prefer European languages to Nigerian languages. The preference pattern for English, Yoruba and Igbo for 1990 and 1991 at the University of Ibadan (located in the Yoruba city of Ibadan) is as shown in Table 3. Even then, it is observed that many of the students do not come to study the indigenous languages out of genuine interest. Some use the courses to secure admission with an intention to change over to other courses of their interest.

On ethnicism, the English language is favoured as a neutral language by the various ethnic groups. The Hausas will not agree to use Yoruba or Igbo as a national language, neither will any Igbo and Yoruba groups succumb to the use of Hausa as a national language. The fear of ethnic domination, politically, economically and culturally is entertained by each of these groups against one another, while the minority groups resent domination by all three majority groups.

Some scholars in a bid to defend their job as English language teachers have viciously condemned patriotic calls for a development of the indigenous

**Table 3** Preference pattern of applicants for English, Igbo and Yoruba courses at the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

Year	English	Igbo	Yoruba
1990	384	8	29
1991	344	8	29
Total	728	16	58

languages in the country. An elite of no less status than Professor Obemeata, a reputable English language scholar and teacher, in a newspaper article (Obemeata, 2002: 2), presents the view of an educated group who feel threatened that a positive shift in attitude towards the indigenous languages could negatively affect their job prospects.

Highlights of the submission made in the article are as follows:

- (1) Children have no advantage in being taught in the mother tongue. The mother tongue has a negative effect on intelligent test performance of children.
- (2) Mother tongue interferes negatively with the learning and usage of the English language.
- (3) Mother tongue learning does not lead to educational development and it does not seem to contribute to an improvement in the quality of education in the country.
- (4) The language project of NERDC (that is, developing indigenous languages) may, after all, be a colossal waste of resources.

The incurable damage, which the above argument must have done to language learning in Nigeria, cannot yet be ascertained. But the consequence of the negative attitude of speakers to indigenous languages can be seen in the perpetuation of negative factors of underdevelopment directly or indirectly related to language, for example, language inactivity or death, illiteracy and underdevelopment of education, communication, politics and the society as a whole.

The last instance of negative attitude to discuss here pertains to the plain ignorance of some members of the elite group about language, as demonstrated by some political members of the elite class. This is well illustrated by a report of an incident that took place in one of the state legislatures in Nigeria not too long ago (cf. Bamgbose, 2001). On 9 December 1991, the Lagos state house of assembly discussed the desirability of using Yoruba, the dominant language of the state (about 90% of the population speaks Yoruba as their mother tongue or second language), and as a language of debate in the house, in accordance with the provisions of the constitution (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999: Section 97) which empowers each state to decide on the use of such a language in addition to English. The outcome of this debate was that the house, wholly constituted by Yoruba legislators, rejected this dominant and major Nigerian language on the grounds that:

Yoruba language is not appropriate for the conduct of business of the House of Assembly since Lagos is a cosmopolitan city. Besides, its use is capable of demeaning and reducing the intellectual capacity of legislators (*The Guardian*, 10 December 1999).

### The Forms and Content of Enlightenment Activities

Many language scholars and educationists (Adegbija, 2000; Bamgbose, 2001) have consistently emphasised the need for the Nigerian people to develop positive attitudes towards both the indigenous languages and English. From all indications, it seems the main target of the enlightenment programme, in

the first instance, is the Nigerian elite in their various formations. Enlightenment has come via formal classroom lectures, symposia, seminars, workshops and conferences. Much information has also been passed on in the form of opinions, suggestions and appeals through the non-formal means of the mass media and public speeches at religious and social gatherings.

The content of enlightenment activities that have taken place is geared towards a positive reorientation of the cognitive experiences and emotive tendencies of Nigerians towards their indigenous language. A summary of the basic information content of the enlightenment programme is presented here from our own viewpoint:

- (1) A human being without competence in his/her mother tongue is deprived and dehumanised. To be denied the opportunity to acquire education or communicate in one's mother tongue is a violation of one's linguistic rights (Tollefson, 1991; Wolff, 1999). It is, therefore, a challenge for speakers to (i) strive to be competent and literate in their mother tongues, and (ii) improve their competence in English before they finish their formal education.
- (2) The use of mother tongues in informal and formal contexts enhances ethnic solidarity, social integration, linguistic and cultural pride and efficiency in communication. It also enables the languages to develop and increase in status (Adegbija, 1994). The use of the mother tongue in the education of a child enhances cognitive development and intellectual capacity, creativity and manipulative ability (Bamgbose, 1976; Chumbow, 1990; UNESCO, 1953). Some major projects that provided justification for the statement above were the 6-year (Yoruba) Primary Project (SYPP) carried out in Ile-Ife in 1976 (cf. Afolayan, 1979, 1999) and the Primary Education Improvement Project on Hausa (PEIP) carried out in Zaria (Lassa, 1977).

The acquisition of competence in a mother tongue facilitates the proper learning of a second language (Cummins, 1984; Royer & Carlo, 1991), whereas the straight use of a foreign/second language to teach children who are not yet competent in their mother tongues may result in lack of competence in both the mother tongues and second language, especially when there is lack of adequate exposure to the second language (Adegbija, 1994; Bamgbose, 1985). At best, the children may in the words of Cummins (1981) acquire 'basic interpersonal communicative skills' (BICS), but not 'cognitive academic language proficiency' (CALP) in the second language; thus, they fail to acquire basic intellectual skills in their mother tongues. The primacy of the mother tongue in a bilingual/multilingual person is non-negotiable (Adegbite, 1993; Afolayan, 1991).

- (3) English is a second language in Nigeria. The high social prestige attached to it may be justified on the grounds that it performs certain instrumental functions as a language of inter-ethnic communication, official communication, language of education and language of globalisation, providing access to education, gainful employment and information technology (Crystal, 1997). But it hinders effective social mobilisation and does not effectively convey all the nuances, cultural loading, feelings and emotions required by the particular messages people want to communicate

(Adegbiya, 1994). As a second language, it ought to complement the indigenous languages that serve as mother tongues of Nigerians. Thus, rather than dominate those languages, it should occupy a secondary position to them.

- (4) Multilingualism is an asset rather than liability to a nation if the linguistic resources are well planned. Such planning must recognise the primacy of the mother tongues of individuals, the complementary role of the second language and the voluntary options of learning some other languages. The diversity in multilingualism can be positively harnessed to engender unity and progress in a nation, as Donna M. Ogle says in *Reading Today* (Ogle, 2001: 4):

Individually, we can only know a part,  
Together, we can understand the whole.

### Shift in language attitudes

As has been stated previously in this paper, the educated élite all have a positive attitude towards English and no case has ever been made for a reversal of this trend. If anything at all, the call that is being made is for this same attitude to be extended to indigenous languages such that both can play complementary roles in their being utilised for national development.

With respect to the indigenous languages, the patterns of attitude before and after enlightenment have been observed in two directions: (1) where negative attitude persists; and (2) where there is a shift from negative to positive attitude. The first pattern has already been presented above with its attendant effects. Scholars have also reported instances of the second pattern. In the past three decades, papers, articles and books reporting experimental, empirical and theoretical research have been presented in support of enhancing the status of indigenous languages in Nigeria. At various educational and linguistic conferences and workshops, scholars have discussed and presented communiqués on the complementary roles of indigenous languages and English in national development. The activities of authors, publishers, mass media practitioners, film artistes and producers too in promoting the indigenous languages have also increased in recent times. However, all these positive efforts need to be stepped up for the campaign to receive wide acceptance among the élite and consequently gain the support of the masses.

On corpus development, standard orthographies have been produced for about 65 Nigerian languages via the efforts of government, ethnic cultural groups, communities and individuals (Adegbiya, 1993; Emenanjo, 1990; Mukoshy, 1992). Emenanjo (1990) claims that a few of these languages have well-established orthographies, standard written varieties, long traditions of writing, large and varied corpora of written literature among all other types of texts and sophisticated and dynamic metalanguages. Despite these efforts, no Nigerian language may, in the strict sense of the term, qualify to be called 'developed' because none of them is used as a medium of teaching subjects at higher levels of education (Bokamba & Tlou, 1977). Olofe (1990) observes that while English is taught as either a specialist or service course or both in all Nigerian universities, only 35% of the universities offer Yoruba, 25% Hausa

and 30% Igbo. Apart from the three major languages, very little attention is paid to the minor languages.

Lastly, the National Policy on Education (NPE), published in 1977 and revised in 1981 and 1998 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1977), and The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999) give documentary evidence for the roles assigned to languages in the nation. The content of the language provisions in the NPE can be paraphrased as follows:

- (1) The medium of instruction in pre-primary education shall be the mother tongue or language of immediate community (NPE, para 11.3);
- (2) The medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and, at a later stage, English (NPE, para. 15.4);
- (3) Each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major indigenous languages, viz. Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, in addition to his or her own mother tongue, at the secondary school level (NPE, para. 19.4).

In the Nigerian constitution, two provisions of language are stated for use in the national and state's houses of assembly thus:

- (1) The business of the national assembly shall be conducted in English, Hausa, Ibo (sic) and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made thereof (The Constitution, Section 55).
- (2) The business of the House of Assembly shall be conducted in English but the House may in addition to English conduct the business of the House in one or more languages in the state as the House may by resolution approve (The Constitution, Section 97).

Although the provisions in the two documents above have had far-reaching effects on the attitudes of some Nigerians to indigenous languages, many scholars still believe that much more impact will be made on language planning and development if:

- (1) some provisions are stated more clearly by removing ambiguities and completely deleting escape clauses that tend to water down the provisions, e.g. 'when adequate arrangement have been made thereof' or 'subject to availability of teachers';
- (2) a comprehensive language policy can be formulated completely on its own terms instead of shifting language provisions from educational and political policy documents;
- (3) statements of the provisions can be backed with concrete action in terms of adequate implementation, political will and support of the people.

### Conclusion

Since national development is best achieved by the collective participation of the people of a nation and since the complementarities of both the indigenous languages of the citizenry and English provide the best means of their social mobilisation towards developmental activities, both the élite and masses ought to be correctly informed about language planning and policy issues.

Enlightenment may seem to have repercussions on shifts in attitudes towards indigenous languages in Nigeria. But the success of the enlightenment programme would depend first on the acceptance of the critical elite group before it is later embraced by the masses.

Although Bamgbose (2001: 9) concedes that attitudes are not easily changed, even in the face of compelling evidence, he still suggests that awareness campaigns should be designed to combat negative language attitudes.

Fortunately the pattern of shifts in attitudes recorded has been, unidirectional, from negative to positive and not vice versa. It is expected that this trend should continue. Recently a colleague who is a good friend of this writer justified this positive expectation. Despite his vast knowledge about language-planning issues, he used to argue vehemently against the use of indigenous languages in education, while he supports the dominant propagation of English. A year ago as a leader of a literacy organisation in Nigeria he coordinated a World Bank/Universal Basic Education (UBE), Nigeria-sponsored project on condition that the mother tongue of people must serve as medium of instruction in early primary education. He embarked on the project sceptically, but was surprised later by the positive end result. His (Onukaogu, 2002: 35) recent article in a Nigerian newspaper, *Nigerian Tribune*, entitled 'Promoting literacy through reading and writing in mother tongue' aptly represents his current stand on the language policy issue.

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