

Linguistics Diversity and Nigerian Languages Dynamism

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Abstract

Nigeria seats about 450 languages on a land mass of less than 7percent of the total area of the African continent. This linguistic diversity explores the dynamism of language to adapt to situational constraints occasioned by regional/geographical, social, educational, and occupational domains, among others. This paper sets to examine the concept of linguistic diversity as it relates to the Nigerian experience. To achieve this, secondary data on the concept were reviewed. The study found that linguistic diversity is indeed a blessing which should be harnessed in Nigeria. Consequently, the paper recommends an aggressive use of mother tongues amongst Nigerian family members, school administrators, curriculum developers and teachers can also help the children in retaining and developing their mother tongues by initiating and implementing policies that encourage communication with the learners in such languages, government agencies like the National Orientation Agency, can also vigorously pursue projects aimed at communicating strong affirmative messages about the value of acquiring additional languages and emphasizing the fact that multilingualism is indeed a blessing and an important linguistic accomplishment.

Keywords: *Linguistic diversity, Language, Mother tongue, Multilingualism, Communication*

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Background to the Study

Nigeria is a country with extreme linguistic fragmentation. In fact, the present linguistic situation in the country may be understood in the context of a worldwide process of balkanization. This, according to Connor (1991), is a process caused by “the almost total lack of co-occurrence that exists today between political and ethnic borders in the world”. Geographically, Nigeria is populated by over 150 million people of whom 35 percent are Hausa/Fulani speaking located in the northern region. 20 percent are Yoruba who live in the western region, 18 percent is Igbo located in the eastern region of the country of which particular regions speak different languages as indicated on the Nigerian map.

Babajide (2003) opines that based on the languages spoken in Nigeria, it is appropriate to assume that Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo are the three main languages, and each is widely spoken in their various regions while over 400 other spoken languages throughout the country are seen as 'minority' languages. The labels 'majority/main' and 'minority' languages in Nigeria also translate directly to the distribution of socio-political and economic power and prestige.

Language is a powerful tool of control used by the colonial powers. Language forms a large part of the culture of people as it is through language that a people express their folk tales, myths, preserves culture and history. Pinker (1994) views language as a cover or more potent characteristic of human behaviour. It consists of a comprehensive and overlapping set of sub-language with ethnically and geographically defined territory known as dialects. Some dialects are defined by shared settings known to be registered while others are linked to profession, class or educational level or a combination of these elements.

Among humans, language arises from a need to communicate. Halliday (2006) defines language as a medium with which human beings communicate with one another. However, language, as powerful as it is, functions in certain situations and environments. As a consequence, language is not experienced in isolation but in relation to actions and events from which the things said or written derive their meanings (Halliday, 1985). Language use at different speech events largely depends on the 'context of situation' based on the linguistic features of field, tenor and mode. These are highly general concepts for describing how the context of situation determines the kinds of meaning expressed (Halliday, 2006).

Bai and Shi (2002) submit that language includes a wide range of variation in the variety of human activities in a system of interacting with somebody, society, or culture. It also plays a crucial role in the social, political and economic life of the people in a given geographic entity. In spite of all perceived roles of languages to humankind, an all-embracing interpretation of it continues to elude us due to the complexity of its structure and the functions it performs.

Lewis (2001) opines that any guideline for language, especially in the system of education, has to take account of the attitude of those likely to be affected. In the long run, no policy will succeed which does not make one of the three following functions: (a) conform to the express attitude of those involved, (b) convince those who expressed attitudes about the rightness of the policy, (c) those that seek to remove the causes of the disagreement in any case knowledge about attitude is essential to the formation of a policy as well as success in its implementation. This paper seeks to examine linguistic diversity in the Nigerian context.

The Concept of Language

Language is an important tool in the society because man needs it to share his ideas, experiences, emotions, and interact with other people in the society or in his environment. It is the principal means used by which human beings communicate with one another. Language is primarily spoken, although it can be transferred to other media, such as writing (Bhatia, 1993). Crystal (2003) states that language is a purely human and non-instructive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols. In addition to the above, there are other forms of communications like the non-verbal communication, which is the use of body language, gestures, signs, and signals to pass on information. Fakuade (1998) defines language as “the means by which men communicate with each other and with themselves”. Therefore, it is apt to conclude that language is an effective tool for socialization and social intercourse. Thus, it is the manifest use language that distinguishes man from animals.

Babatunde (2003) observes that language performs transactional, interactional and educational functions. The roles of language in human society include a substantial amount of people's historical experience, their thought patterns, and their world view. Language roles paralleled along the embodiment of culture lead to the depth of a person's reflection beyond the practical necessities of life to such aspects as the search for knowledge, education and collaboration among multi-ethnic societies. In such a way, it revealed how possible it is for the English language to elaborate functions in almost all facets of life in Nigeria.

Langacker (1973), explains that language is the instrument which spreads through our thoughts, mediates our relation with others and creeps into our dreams. It is fundamentally a system of conceptualization, which facilitates thinking and determines action for the individuals. It is a means by which people communicate. Human thinking and activities is complex and conveyed, not only by actions, but also by the vehicle of language. Language use at any particular time is a reflection of the activities being carried out, which give rise to the concept of register in its broadest sense (Fakuade, 1998).

Language enables one to imagine counterfactual objects, events, and states of affairs; it is intimately related to intentionality: the feature of all human thoughts whereby they are essentially about, or directed toward, things outside themselves, by the use of language (Drew and Heritage, 1992). Basically, language can be described as a mediating system interposed like a layer between a layer of 'reality' and a layer of 'society', which talks in and about that world thus giving rise to the concept of sociolinguistics which is the reality of society that shapes and constrains language use (Fakuade, 1998). Using language typically makes most actions more worthwhile and effective, and makes many other actions possible quite apart from acting upon reality (Morris and Hirst, 1991).

Language effectiveness is possible because Language is a rule-governed activity. When the rules are disobeyed, misunderstanding, lack of clarity, confusion, and ambiguity and so on may occur. In a situation where language structure does not bring about effective communication, probably due to some stylistic manipulations, difficulties of understanding and interpretation may be faced by the language users. In Pragmatics however, meanings are implied and the rule being followed are “unspoken, unwritten” rules (Keith, 2001).

Classification of Languages in Nigeria

The different domains of the use of the various languages in Nigeria are classified into three categories as follows:

- a) Indigenous or native language: Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo have been constitutionally recognized as 'major'.
- b) Exogenous or non-indigenous: In this category, we have English, French Arabic and other languages like German and Russia which have a rather restricted functional scope.
- c) Pidgin languages: This is represented by Nigerian Pidgin English, with a dual status of being at once indigenous and now exogenous.

The indigenous languages vary greatly in functional, structural, and spatial characteristics. It has been noted that the celebrity of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba is as a result of their numerical strength in terms of their number of speakers (Harm, 1991). These languages are followed by Fulfulde, Ibibio, Efik, Kanuri Tiv, Nupe, Ijo, Edo, Igala, etc. It is discovered that over 500,000 people speak each of these languages (Akinnaso 1991, Jibril 1990).

The three major languages in Nigeria perform official functions side by side with the English language. They are used in some cases for the conduct of business in the civil service, law, commerce and education and all other official domains. For instance, English, Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba are allowed for conduct of legislative functions in the States' Houses of Assembly in Nigeria. They also play a prominent role in education in recent years. It is officially stated in the National Policy on Education (NPE) that the mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction in the first two years of primary school. English has been more noticeable in use in Nigeria. It serves various functions as well as official language as the second language. It remains the language of bureaucracy of government, of education, of commerce, of science and technology, of inter-ethnic cooperation and contacts, etc. French is in every sense of the word, a foreign language in Nigeria and its impact on the country is rather limited to a few schools such as universities where it is learnt as a school subject and used in diplomatic contacts, especially with Nigerian immediate neighbours in Chad, Niger, Benin, Togo and Cameroon and with other foreign embassies. It was made second official language during the Sani Abacha era but has a limited number of speakers. Arabic is mainly a predominant language of Islamic religion and aids Koranic schools in Nigeria today. It is also learnt as a school subject in some universities, such as the University of Ibadan, Usman Dan Fodio University, Sokoto, as well as Bayero University, Kano.

The third category of languages in Nigeria is the Nigerian Pidgin; which is a hybrid Nigerian language. There have been several ideas and views about its origin whether it is indigenous or exogenous. Omodiagbe (1992), comments that 'Pidgin is an offshoot of the pure 'English of the early missionaries and colonial administrators'. It is the product of necessity and pragmatism, as well as amiability and acceptability of the English language.

Oladejo (1991), contrary to Omodiagbe's submission, describes Nigerian Pidgin as 'the only truly neutral indigenous Nigerian language'. Whatever its status, it is a lingua franca in informal domains, especially among the non-western educated masses. It is also a principal language of commerce which has been creolized in Sapele, Warri and other areas of Delta and River states of Nigeria. It is used in literary or creative writing, in mass media, in inter-ethnic communication among lower classes in some educational institutions. In urban centres like

Warri, Benin City, Sapele, Port Harcourt, Onitsha and Calabar, it is spoken by over 70% of the adult population, and in these places almost all the children of school age speak pidgin fluently. It functions as a language of wider communication in public institutions, public service and welfare centres, post offices, police stations, Army barracks and Magistrate centres. In market places and commercial centres; it is equally widely spoken (Agheyisi, 1984; Adebija, 1992b).

Multiglossia' and Domains of Language Use in Nigeria

Multiglossia' is a term used as an extension of Ferguson's (1959) 'diglossia' and (Adebija 2004) to describe language use situation in a multilingual environment like Nigeria. It should be stated that Fishman's (1967) is more appropriate to explain language use situation in Nigeria, where there are varieties of a language. Language potency and prestige in Nigeria are directly related to language functions. For instance, the English language issued in formal situations, in the media, in education, etc. as a result of its prestige. The functions assigned to a language or languages enhance the prestige of such languages like Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa and English. Various languages in Nigeria have distinct functional manifestations at several hierarchical levels of usage, that is, each of the languages has domains of use different from the others. They are assigned roles based on their prestige and status.

In the Nigerian situation, multilingualism is directly linked to 'diglossia'. This determines the roles and functions of a language, that is, the role a language performs within a multilingual speech community like Nigeria. Some languages may be more functionally silent in a particular context than others. A language could be used to perform certain functions based on the perception of its users, its suitability for certain occasions, participants, the intention of the communicative encounter, interpersonal goals relating to identity, solidarity, exclusion and commitment of oneself (Adebija 1987; Searle 1969; Austin 1969).

At the societal level, language functions appear to be more fixed. The functions of languages especially in multilingual contexts, such as Nigeria include roles relating to official use of language, being used as national language, media language of wider communication, international communication purposes, school subjects, judiciary functions, roles relating to national identity, solidarity and for cohesiveness of the citizens.

The Determining Factors of Language Domains in Nigeria

It has been discovered that in Nigeria, the following factors determine the language domains:

Prestige and Status

Generally speaking, a language is considered prestigious if given prestigious functions and is considered low if it is not given any function at all or allocated low status functions. In actual sense, through status planning, the status of a low language can be considerably enhanced, for example, in Nigeria, education is taken to be a high prestige domain of language functionality. And those languages that are used as mediums of instruction in Nigeria are given high or prestigious status; this is the case with English, Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa.

Level of Development

Development is used here synonymously with modernization and standardization. The most basic measure of language development is graphization. Other measures include availability of dictionaries and linguistic descriptions, lexical expansion, met language or register. In Nigerian multilingual society, the functions allocated to a language seem to be directly

proportional to the extent of their development. For instance, Hausa, Igbo, Edo, Yoruba and Efik are offered as school subjects at the West African Examination Council and National Examination Council because they have been already developed.

Historical and Political Profile

According to Adegbija (2004), to a large extent, the historical and political past tradition tends to attract greater functions to a language or languages. National functions are assigned to Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, representing the languages of the three major political power blocs in Nigeria. Equally, the international functions of English in the world, is enhanced by the political power-broken dynamism of the combined force of the native speakers of the language; hence English language is allocated official functions in Nigeria.

Institutional Policies

Institutional policies of government ministries, organs or agencies, cultural and religious organizations, language development centres, universities and the other educational institutions and the media within the country contribute remarkably to the determination of language functions. Generally, languages that receive the institutional blessings tend to prosper functionally while those that do not tend to functionally wane or wither. In Nigeria, the three elevated native languages, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, have the backing of the institutional policies of the government. And right now, some minority indigenous languages like Efik, Edo, Urhobo are also being given some institutional policy backing in their various regions.

Numerical Strength

The number of speakers of a language tends to contribute to its prestige and status and it affects its allotted functions. The national function allocated to Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba is traceable to the number of their speakers. Languages with a small population of speakers in Nigeria are functionally underrated, oppressed and belittled (Jibril 1990). Certainly, the most noticeable aspect of language use situation in Nigeria is the hierarchical distribution of functions among the different languages in the country. The indigenous languages in Nigeria are the languages of ethnic solidarity and local day-to-day interactions. A few of them are used in broadcasting (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, Efik, Edo). They are also predominant in religious worship of various kinds. It is significant to note that as far as functions of languages in the Nigerian multilingual context is concerned, speakers modify their speech codes appropriately to fit changes of interlocutors, social setting, discourse topic, and conversational mood. The domains for the use of each of the languages in Nigeria include the institution of government, the media, commerce, schools, religion and the home.

Language Use According to the Audience

Despite the prevalence of English as the language of wider communication in Nigeria, it would be foolhardy for a young person to speak in English in a normal jocular circumstance with an elderly person. It is considered a form of disrespect, rudeness and misconstrued value. Speaking the mother tongue serves as a polite technique. Therefore, in circumstances like this, a larger percentage of the Nigerian populace would prefer using their mother tongue. Schmeid (1985) and Sure (1991) opined that “the greater the age and the higher the cultural and social status attained by an addresser, the greater the need a speaker feels to employ politeness strategies. “In this circumstance, what counts as politeness strategies in interpersonal interactions in most Nigerian communities is better expressed by the very fact of speaking the mother tongue”.

Phatic Solidarity and Boundaries Markers

Language choice is used to suggest either familiarity or solidarity or as a mark of divergence. This is exemplified in a situation in which a student converses with his/her lecturer in their shared mother tongue after the class. Also, in an elder-junior relationship, the junior would rather greet the elderly in the mother tongue in place of English so as not to be considered rude. The English language has no room for elaborate greeting system which is found in many indigenous languages. Language choice here may also be used to dissociate oneself from the ethnic loyalty.

Language choice, with regards to the family, occurs when in a multilingual family, the mother tongue is reverted to (in a case where the language of the environment is different from the language spoken at home). Although the language spoken in the larger society is thought to be more prestigious, the members of the family prefer to use their own language. This is to show familiarity, intimacy and closeness. However, when they are with other members of the community, they converse in the more prestigious language.

Language choice varies according to the different domains of use; this implies that language varies according to situations as well as the relationship that exists between the various interlocutors. It suggests that interlocutors switch from one language to another, which is what Blom and Gumperz (1972) and Gumperz (1982) identified as metaphorical code switching. Metaphorical code switching is most likely to be motivated by the topic or according to the issues being discussed.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is true that Nigeria is a multilingual society with diverse cultures and languages. The language use situation in Nigeria is clear despite the number of languages in the country. Each domain of language use is known for its unique language use features, although there could be deviations in some situations. Various languages: the major indigenous languages, foreign languages and minority languages have distinct use domains. It has been observed that due to the co-existence of these languages, some linguistic phenomena are unavoidable. Nigeria seems to be a giant in every sphere of life which includes the complexity of her languages, so, this uniqueness of the county as it affects her languages in all domains of their use cannot be over-emphasized. Based on the above, the paper recommends as follows:

- a. Parents should consistently use the mother tongue in communicating to their children at home. This will encourage the children acquire the language thereby reducing or eliminating the chances of the death or extinction of such languages.
- b. Older members of a speech community and teachers can also help children retain and develop their mother tongues by inculcating into the younger generation the value of knowing additional languages and the fact that bilingualism is an important linguistic and intellectual accomplishment.
- c. Secondary school teachers of foreign languages should first have some knowledge of the source language of the learners.
- d. Teachers have stake in going the extra mile in availing themselves of the results contained in studies of indigenous languages. Where no such information exists, teachers should seize the moment and take the initiative. They should therefore deploy their efforts in incorporating local languages in the curriculum.
- e. Dominant mother tongues deserve to be studied and their characteristics exploited to assist in the learning of a new language, foreign or indigenous.

- f. At the local, state and national levels, efforts must be redoubled in ensuring that potentially viable indigenous languages receive, as a matter of deliberate and sustained policy, the resources necessary to ensure their development which will avert their unnecessary loss.

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