

Complementarity or Conflict: The Role of English in the Nigerian Linguistic Context

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ABSTRACT

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This paper argues that English plays a complementary rather than a conflicting role in the Nigerian linguistic context. Nigeria is the most linguistically heterogeneous country in the African continent, with more than 500 indigenous languages spoken within its borders. With such a linguistically diverse landscape, a common language is needed to facilitate inter-ethnic communication and social interaction among the people. English, like French and Portuguese in other parts of Africa, has played this role since the post-colonial era. As an exoglossic lingua franca and the official language of the country, the use of English has helped to minimize inter-ethnic rivalry and conflict that would erupt if any indigenous language were imposed to play these roles in Nigeria. The paper further argues that there is a stable diglossic relationship between English and the indigenous languages in Nigeria because these languages have maintained clearly distinct linguistic domains in which they function; the High language (English) in formal domains and the Low (indigenous languages) in informal domains. With proper language planning and the formulation and implementation of a pragmatic language policy, especially in the domain of education, English and the indigenous languages can continue to co-exist and complement one another. This paper has used the concepts of diglossia and domain analysis as the theoretical framework

Key words: Complementarity, Conflict, Diglossia, Domain analysis, Exoglossic, Endoglossic, Lingua franca, Official language, Indigenous language.

1. Introduction

Nigeria is a complex polity. Demographically, it is home to about 174 million people (Population Nigeria, 2013). This makes Nigeria the most populous country on the African continent. Linguistically, it is the most multilingual country in Africa (Adegbija, 2004) with as many as 553 indigenous languages used by its inhabitants (Blench, 2007). Nigeria, therefore, is not only the most populous country in Africa, it is also the

most linguistically diverse and heterogeneous country on the continent. According to Egbe (2014), Nigeria presents one of the most complex ethnolinguistic situations in Africa.

For ease of governance and administration, Nigeria has been divided into 36 states including the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Each state is administered by a state governor who works with members of the State House of Assembly. These states are further divided into local government areas (LGAs) and there are 774 LGAs in total (Adegbija, 2004). Each LGA is overseen by a local government chairperson and councillors. Most of the states in the country are multilingual, with a diversity of indigenous languages used by the people.

With such a complex linguistic environment, it has not been possible for Nigeria to choose an indigenous lingua franca or official language. Like many other multilingual countries in Africa, Nigeria has adopted an exoglossic language policy. (Batibo, 2007:12) explains that “an exoglossic language policy involves the adoption of an ex-colonial language, external to the country, as an official or national language.” English, which is the language of Nigeria’s ex-colonial master, Britain, is both the official language and the de facto lingua franca.

Many reasons have been adduced to justify this “short-cut” approach (Batibo, 2007:12) taken by most African countries to language planning. Batibo (2007:14) explains that “the ex-colonial languages were already highly developed and internationally used”, so independent African countries like Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe, to mention a few, found it more convenient to retain English as the official language instead of developing one or some of the numerous indigenous languages in their countries for that purpose. In addition, the ex-colonial languages were seen as ethnically neutral and, therefore “would not arouse resentment of any ethnic group” (Batibo, 2007:14). In the Nigeria context, more reasons have been put forward for the choice of English as both the official language and lingua franca. Adegbija (2004: 181) explains that “language issues in Nigeria are often quite explosive and conflict ridden.” First, there is the fear of political domination, if any indigenous language is selected as the official

language. Second, Nigeria seeks to avoid India's experience where the choice of Hindi led to riots in many non-Hindi-speaking regions (Yule, 2007). The third reason is lack of political will to enforce the use of any of the indigenous languages (Bamgbose, 2004). Also, there is the lack of infrastructure and resources such as teachers, books and other learning resources for any selected indigenous language (Adegbija, 2004); and finally, English is seen as a "unifying force in the turbulent linguistic terrain of the country" (Owolabi and Dada, 2012:1678).

However, in order to ensure the promotion of indigenous languages in the country, some of them have been given official recognition by the Federal Government of Nigeria. Sections 55 and 97 of the country's 1999 Constitution provide policy guidelines for various linguistic needs.

2. Nigeria Language Policy

In Nigeria, the National Policy on Education (NPE 1977, revised 1981, 1998, 2004) which has been criticized for lack of clarity (Afolayan, 1984) recognizes three major (national) languages – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba- as languages of national culture and integration. These three languages which are spoken by the three demographically more populous ethnic groups are meant to be used along with English in the conduct of official business in the country's National Assembly consisting of the Senate and the House of Representatives. In addition, they are to be used in national functions such as in national mobilization, rallying people for national goals; for example, registration of voters in an election or the registration for identity cards, and also for unity in diversity (Adegbija, 2004:184). The three languages are also used as mediums of instruction in education in the regions where they are widely spoken, and are studied as school subjects up to the tertiary level. In practice, however, these languages are more regional than national in distribution. Hausa is spoken predominantly in the North, Igbo is mainly spoken in the South East while Yoruba is widely used in the South West.

Apart from the three major languages, eleven other languages have been given official recognition and referred to as secondary languages (National Policy on Education, 2004). These are languages that are

spoken by more than one million people. They include Fulfude, Efik, Kanuri, Tiv, Ijo, Edo, Nupe, Igala, Idoma, Epira and Ibibio. The secondary languages are used at the initial stages of primary education in the immediate communities where they are spoken, and also given slots in national radio and television broadcasting. Fifty other indigenous languages which have about 100,000 speakers each have also been given official recognition “with varying functions, extent of use in formal education and degree of official recognition, acceptance as well as levels of development” (Adegbija, 2004:185). The rest of the indigenous languages are small group minority languages which have little or no place in formal use except spoken in informal domains of family and village interaction. Akinnaso (1996) points out that only 120 of the more than 400 languages spoken in Nigeria have written orthographies. It would be impossible for a nation with more than 500 indigenous languages to attempt to develop all of them for use in formal or official domains. There is, therefore, a perceived hierarchical ranking of the numerous indigenous languages in Nigeria based on demography.

It is pertinent to mention the existence of Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE), which is a pidgin variety based on English. NPE co-exists with English and the indigenous languages and it is mostly spoken in the southern part of the country. It originated from contacts between natives of the coastal regions with Portuguese sailors, British traders, missionaries and colonial administrators during the pre-colonial and colonial era (Adegbija, 2004). NPE is gaining grounds as a local lingua franca, especially, in the multilingual Delta regions where some children are acquiring it as their first language (L1). Though not officially recognized by the government, NPE serves as an inter-ethnic lingua franca, mostly among the uneducated population, at the market place, military barracks, colleges and university campuses, especially in the Federal Government Unity Schools, which have students from different states of the Federation (Adebija, 2004). It is also used in the media for news broadcasts, drama sketches, advertising, discussions and programmes on radio and television. Those who are not so educated and cannot speak the standard variety of English use the pidgin variety for inter-ethnic communication and social interaction in informal domains.

3. The Role of English in Nigeria

As the official language in Nigeria, English is the language used in formal domains such as government, administration, education, the judiciary, business, mass media and for international diplomacy. As the de facto lingua franca, English functions as a bridge across the ethnic divide in the country. It facilitates inter-ethnic communication and social interaction among the educated members of the society who do not have a common indigenous linguistic code. Internationally, English is the window through which Nigeria connects with the outside world, since it is an international or global language. It is the language with which Nigeria does business with the rest of the Anglophone world. Commenting on the important role English plays in the Nigerian linguistic environment, Adegbija (2004:183) affirms that “its role is so vital that many Nigerians believe the country cannot exist, or at least its existence as one entity would be severely threatened or jeopardized without English.”

In education, English is learnt as a school subject at the lower primary (1-3) level. As from Primary 4 up to the tertiary level, English becomes the medium of instruction. Indigenous languages are used as mediums of instruction in the lower primary classes. It should be noted that no indigenous language is used as a medium of instruction in the secondary or tertiary institutions. This policy clearly gives English an elevated status in Nigeria. Because English is the language of higher education in Nigeria, it is seen as a gateway to employment and socio-economic advancement. Competence in English, therefore, ensures upward social mobility and enhanced economic status. English is thus the language of prestige, economic power as well as political power, not only in Nigeria but also in most Anglophone African countries. In these countries, “the English language is seen as a personal asset, as an instrument to promote one’s personal career, as a stepping stone to getting a better job and as a social status marker” (Schmied 1991:170). No wonder Kachru (1995 in Owolabi & Dada, 2012: 1677) asserts that “English in West Africa is no longer a stranger in the region’s linguistic ecology, as it is now regarded a member of the linguistic family.”

Given the complexity and the diversity of the linguistic landscape of Nigeria, English enjoys a privileged position both at the national, state and local government levels. For example, English is used officially in all the State Houses of Assembly (Adegbija, 2004). This is because most states are not linguistically

homogeneous as earlier noted. Like the country, most states are multilingual and where there is a dominant language, there exists different dialects of the same language which are not often mutually intelligible. There is always recourse to the use of English at the national, state and the local government levels, making English highly indispensable in the Nigerian linguistic environment.

The Nigerian situation is unlike some African countries such as Botswana, Ethiopia and Tanzania that have indigenous languages for inter-ethnic communication. Setswana is the national language and lingua franca of Botswana (Bagwasi, 2003), Amharic is the national language of Ethiopia (Anteteh & Ado, 2006) and Kiswahili is the national language and lingua franca of Tanzania (Rubagumya, 1991). These countries have an endoglossic language policy, “the adoption of an indigenous language as an official or semi- official language” (Batibo, 2007:12). In Tanzania, for example, Kiswahili is used in both formal and informal domains of language use. It is used for communication in offices, parliamentary debates and most other formal settings (Abdulaziz-Mkifili, 1972). It is the language of cultural identity and national pride. It therefore co-exists with English as the official language used in formal domains.

Similarly, in Botswana, Setswana is the language of national pride, unity and cultural identity. Bagwasi (2003:213) points out that Setswana is used in “everyday communication in government offices, local business, transport, shops, market place, traditional courts and gatherings, political rallies and at home.” Setswana is also used at government and official levels, both in spoken and written forms to communicate with regional authorities and the local population (Bagwasi, 2003). This means that Setswana is used both in formal and informal domains in Botswana, making it a semi-official language. In Tanzania and Botswana, therefore, it could be said that the indigenous national languages have migrated into spaces formerly reserved for the H language, English. Bagwasi (2003:213) states that “despite the fact that English is considered the language of government administration, Setswana is competing effectively with it as the official language.” Therefore, both Kiswahili and Setswana are effectively competing with English in official domains of language use in the two countries.

This is contrary to the Nigerian experience. In the Nigerian linguistic environment, English does not have any serious contender or challenger in official domains. The three major languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, have limited use in formal domains, in spite of the stipulations of the language policy. Indigenous languages in Nigeria are used at the lower primary level of the education system while English takes over as a medium of instruction throughout the secondary and tertiary levels. The diglossic situation between English and the indigenous languages in Nigeria can therefore be said to be in complementary distribution, with these languages having clearly demarcated linguistic roles.

4. The Diglossia Model

Diglossia is a term introduced by Ferguson (1959) and popularized by Fishman (1972). According to Ferguson (1959), diglossia refers to a situation where two varieties of the same language exist side by side throughout a speech community; with each variety having a definite role to play. These varieties are classified as High (H) and Low (L). The H variety is used for formal (official) domains while the L variety is used in informal settings. Ferguson (1959) maintains that H is prestigious, has a great tradition of literary heritage and is standardized. H is also learnt at school while L is acquired at home.

Fishman (1972) extended the original concept of diglossia to include the functional distribution of two or more languages to serve different communication tasks in a society. According to Fishman (1972), in a diglossic situation, different languages are assigned different roles and these languages are in complementary distribution. In Nigeria, English which is the official language is regarded as H and it is used in formal domains. On the other hand, the indigenous languages, which are acquired at home, are L used in informal settings such as family, friendship and village interactions. It follows, therefore, that H and L languages are in functional complementary distribution and not in conflict.

It is important to note that although diglossia may remain stable for a long time in most communities, overlap is common and certain specific functions tend to occur in connection with both H and L (Fasold, 1987). Obeng (1997: 70) also adds that “increased literacy and broader communication as well as increased

nationalism throughout a country may lead to a demise of diglossic situation” and leakage of functions.

Obeng further explains that:

the more familiar people become with the H variety, the more likely it could perform the function performed by the L variety. In the same way, increased literacy makes the H variety available to more people and hence the possibility of performing a function traditionally undertaken by the L variety (1997:70).

This is the case with diglossia in Nigeria. The H and L languages still maintain a stable diglossic relationship in formal domains and can be said to be in complementary distribution. However, in informal domains, there appears to be a leakage of functions between H and L due to increased literacy. English is often seen to leak into the informal domains of family and friendship among the educated members of the society. Many studies have shown that educated Nigerians use English to communicate and socialize with colleagues, friends, and family in informal settings (Adegbite, 2003; Ani, 2012, Oyetade, 2001). There is also ample evidence that many educated Nigerians and the educated elite from other Anglophone African countries, prefer to speak English with their children at home than to use their mother tongue languages (Ani, 2012; Prah, 2010; Onyeche, 2001). Ihemere (2006:204) points out that “most parents wish their children to have proficiency in the former colonial languages to improve their chances of social promotion and economic advancement, even at the expense of their mother tongues.” Therefore, in the homes of the educated Nigerians, English is seen encroaching into the informal domain of the family, a sign that there is a breakdown of diglossia in the informal domains of family and friendship among educated Nigerians.

5. Criticisms of Diglossia

Some sociolinguists argue that diglossia presupposes conflict and not complementarity (Gardy and Lafont, 1981; Eckert, 1980). “Sociolinguistics of the periphery” is a term coined by “researchers working on minority languages in Spain and France who attempted a re-interpretation of diglossia from a conflict perspective” (Rubagumya, 1991:72). These researchers emphasize on the dynamics of diglossia and insist on the conflictual nature of diglossic situations (Gardy and Lafont, 1981 in Rubagumya, 1991:72). They believe that “the linguistic divisions within diglossia were inextricably bound up with the social division

between the dominant and the dominated (Rubagumya, 1991:72). These researchers further assert that diglossia was characterized by the conflicts over language functions rather than complementarity as earlier proposed by Ferguson (1959) and Fishman (1972). The conflicts were seen to derive from attempts to reinforce the power of the dominant class through the exercise of political power (Rubagumya, 1991). Sociolinguistics of the periphery question the validity that diglossia contributes to linguistic stability. It further argues that the very existence of H and L varieties or languages implies conflict and change rather than complementarity and stability (Rubagumya 1991:72). Furthermore, Eckert (1980:1056) asserts that “the functions of the standard language exist in opposition to those of the vernacular and this opposition can operate as a powerful force of assimilation by interacting with and reinforcing social evaluation of the domains in which the two languages are used. These scholars believe that in multilingual situations, languages in contact are in conflict and not in complementary distribution as the concept of diglossia suggests.

6. Complementarity or Conflict

It is important to note that the original concept of diglossia is an attempt to assign functional roles to languages in a multilingual situation (Fishman, 1972; Fasold, 1987), what Holmes (2001:27) refers to as “linguistic division of labour.” This is an attempt to create order in an otherwise complex linguistic environment which is the whole essence of language planning. The act of assigning roles to different languages within a speech community cannot be said to be conflictual. In addition, the existence of H and L varieties or languages does not automatically imply conflict because H has clearly demarcated role from L.

Furthermore, the functions of the standard or H language do not exist in opposition to those of the vernacular as suggested by Eckert (1980). Functions might differ according to the domains of language use but not in opposition. For example, the formal/official functions of English in Nigeria do not exist in opposition to those of the indigenous languages which are used as languages of cultural identity and

community or village interactions. Even in education where English and the indigenous languages share functional roles, the language policy assigns the indigenous languages to the lower levels of primary education and English to the higher levels of education. This policy may have its flaws, but it does not bring conflict between English and the indigenous languages. In Nigeria, English complements the indigenous languages because it facilitates inter-ethnic interaction as well as inter-national communication. In the Nigerian linguistic context, the indigenous languages can neither perform the inter-ethnic nor the inter-national roles, given their present status. In addition, English is the language of science and technology; the language of the internet and globalization. No indigenous language in Nigeria has been developed to take over these functions. The indigenous languages do not and cannot compete with English in these official domains of language use.

Mufwene (2005:20) has noted that English has been portrayed as a “killer language” par excellence (Nettle & Romaine, 2000) “which by its own actions putatively has driven and is still driving many languages to extinction.” Mufwene adds that “the fact that a language like English acquires prestige from functioning as a world language does not necessarily situate it in the kind of ecological dynamic that would make it dangerous to indigenous vernaculars (2005: 22). Furthermore, Mufwene (2002:168) believes that:

English is not the most immediate threat to indigenous languages in Africa... anyone who claims that the spread of English around the world endangers indigenous languages should explain how this is possible in countries where it is only a lingua franca for an elite minority, but is barely spoken by the vast majority...”

It is rather unfair to label English a “killer” or “predatory” language because English does not have the agency to kill or endanger indigenous languages. It is the users of English or other European languages, by the linguistic choices they make, based on the socio-economic pressures they encounter, that endanger indigenous languages. For example, it has been observed that in many Anglophone African countries, parents prefer to send their children to English medium schools where English is used as the medium of instruction right from Primary One, contrary to the language policies of these countries (Adegbija, 2004). In addition, many educated parents in Anglophone African countries have also chosen to socialize their

children at home using the English language instead of the indigenous languages or the mother tongues as was earlier pointed out. These linguistic choices are made because parents want their children to have good competence in English to ensure their success in life since English is associated with high social mobility and enhanced socio-economic status. Alimi (2014:158) explains that “the African elite are of the view that their children are better off if they are competent in English and that it is their early exposure to English only that guarantees the attainment of the desired level of competence.” Therefore, the linguistic choices that people make elevate the status of English and jeopardize the indigenous languages.

Alimi (2014) further points out that the general claim that Africa’s indigenous languages are being killed by European languages is not supported by historical evidence. She argues that in different parts of Anglophone Africa, the British policy on education encouraged the use of the vernacular as the medium of instruction in the early school years but post independent African countries jettisoned this policy by adopting English, which they considered neutral, as the official language and therefore, the language of natural integration (p. 157). Alimi concludes that “... the attitude of the African elite, including those in government, to their languages has contributed in no small measure to the decline of Africa’s indigenous languages (2014:157).

Furthermore, not all contact situations bring about conflict. When languages are in contact, there will necessarily be interference but not conflict. Code switching and code mixing, in simple terms, means using one language to complement or assist the other in creating meaning. Therefore, it can safely be said that complementarity is the relationship between English and the indigenous languages in Nigeria.

7. Conclusion

Given the pluralistic nature of the Nigerian linguistic environment, English is simply an indispensable linguistic resource. Without English for the educated population and Nigeria Pidgin English for the not-so-educated, communication among the different ethnic groups would be impossible. English, therefore, forms a linguistic bridge across the multi-ethnic population as well as a link with the international community. It helps the country to do business with the rest of the world. In this era of globalization, the country needs an

international language, a global language to ensure that it is part of the global village. English, therefore, should be seen as complementing the roles of the indigenous languages in inter-ethnic and inter-national communication. No indigenous language in Nigeria has been developed to perform these functions; therefore, there would be no basis for conflict between the roles of English and those of the indigenous languages in formal domains in the Nigerian linguistic context. Bagwasi (2003:217) rightly suggests “striking a balance between the local languages and using them to complement each other.”

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