



LINGUA FRANCA AS A TOOL FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Olughu Oko Okpoh

ABSTRACT

The Nigerian language dilemma is an incontrovertible fact. The multi-lingual nature of the country made the use of English language a linguistic necessity in order to mitigate the problem of mutual intelligibility and acceptability of the more than four hundred (400) ethnic indigenous or vernacular languages across the nation. To compound this problem further, lack of basic unity in the Nigerian system has introduced parochial patriotism immediately after colonialism and independence making the Nigerian language ecology a “narrow Path” full of thorns, which we thread and grope in to in tears, in order to evolve a lingua franca – a national language born out of the multiplicity of indigenous or native languages across Nigeria. Both previous and recent research in language engineering glaringly approve a Lingua Franca, a common national language as the fastest means to develop a technological know-how which will obviously lead to national cohesion and unity. This view was aptly captured in the national policy on education formulated in 1977 with a clause that allows “mother tongue” to be used as a medium of instruction in Nigerian public schools. Though this policy was later reversed, successive Nigerian regimes never had the inertia to achieve this lofty goal. Today the realization of this goal is inevitable, considering the hatred, acrimony, corruption and tribalism inherent in our present social superstructure, which only a national language resolve.

Keywords: Language Lingua Franca, National Development

Introduction

The term Lingua Franca posits a language of communication by a group or groups of persons who do not speak the same native language. It can be rightly defined as a language which is indigenous to and commonly used by the entire population of a country. In other words it is the dominant or only language of the country.

In Nigeria the term “native” is often times misunderstood and misapplied. At one time it could mean people who speak along one dialect group and at other times it could mean a people who speak a parent language from where dialects may have broken off. Victor Manfredi in Agbor and Ehugbo posited that the dialect “Ehugbo” of the Afikpo Igbo of Eastern Nigeria is the centre of Igbo Linguistic consciousness. Thus “Ehugbo” Afikpo Igbo dialect is something like the Latin of Igbo language. An Igbo from say Unwana section of Afikpo, consider himself or herself a native of Unwana, not Afikpo, even though the slight variation and deviation in both the Ehugbo and Unwana dialects of Igbo language poses no communication problem; since both are understood by users of this dialects.. Both

users of these dialects know that they are specifically Igbos. In political circles this has been confused with the aggressive search for identity- a term which has been submerged in tribal hostility. Nigeria is not the only country in Africa or the world that is going through a language “Tower of Babel” problem. But it is certainly one of the few countries in the world that has not made a serious attempt to implement a National language policy for Nigeria no matter the challenges.

India just after her independence in 1947 discovered that the road towards the adoption of a national language could become a Herculean task in a great republic accommodating one third of the world's population. This great republic decided that “Hindi” should become the sole official language of the Indians, supposed to come in to effect in January 1965. “Hindi” as a language is spoken by about 180,000,000 Indians in a country of

more than 400million people. This shows that in a multi tribal and multi-lingual nation of which Nigeria is one, the solution to this kind of problem can seldom be easy. As may be

rightly anticipated part of the problem was political. In south India lived a people called the “Davidians” of the original Indian races before the Aryan invasion of Northern India. They stoutly opposed “Hindi” clamouring for a separate state with “Tamil” (one of their own languages) as the official language. In their argument Dravidian State or Davidian language are quite unique and superior to “Hindi” and has preserved the Indian- Hindu culture during about 1000 years of Muslim rule.

Back home in Africa, Tanzania has toed the line of Indian experience and example. One major problem that beset the Nigerian political landscape is “political naivety, lack of the will to implement visions that will manifest in to a common goal. The argument for a national language or lingua Franca is not a new thing in Nigeria. It was debated in Nigeria's constituent Assembly Abuja on December 14th 1988 and Nigeria tilted towards “WAZOBIA” an adoption of the three major ethnic languages: “Hausa”, “Yoruba”, “Igbo” as a possible lingua Franca for Nigeria. Then in 1977 the federal government of Nigeria promulgated the National policy on Education with the use of the mother tongue in Nigeria's educational system as its major keynote, though the policy revised in 1988 did allow the use of other Nigeria language for national unity. As usual the policy was never implemented; making it a mere paper proclamation even as some developing countries succeeded in this experiment as cited in Emenanjo (1990, p.64): the Philippines Ramos et al. (1967), Mexico Modiano, (1968) Canada, Lambert and Tucker, (1972) and party in Nigeria, the life project, Afolayan (1976)

To further buttress the need for a National language, the Newswatch Magazine of March 20 1989, in an article “what tongue for 250” noted that “for nearly 29 years after independence Nigeria still grapples with the

choice of an indigenous language as a lingua Franca”. Page 16 of that magazine featured another article “Tongues in a twist; which x-rayed “languages as hurdles and how others cleared them”. First, to even suggest means of clearing the hurdles, we must identify exactly where the problem lies. These problems may be viewed from four major factors. The cultural factor, the political factor, the linguistic factor and the religious factor.

The Cultural Factor

Nigeria's troubles lie in its past. Its history is a litany of complexity captured in Mackey's observation in his preface to Brann C.M.B. Comparative Bibliography which state that:

The making of modern Nigeria is one of the greatest problems in state building of any area in the world today. A state of such ethnic and religious diversity containing dozens of ancient cultures and hundreds of living languages is indeed more difficult to centralize than was any nation of Europe. Here we have representatives of all known African language families, as well as a meeting place of the three cultures that are fashioning Modern Africa-traditional, Islamic and Christian. In no other country is the confluence of these three streams more striking than it is in the Nigerian linguistic and social situation where the wealth of indigenous languages, several of them with a millenary tradition of oral and written literature encounters the Arabic Islamic tradition from the North and the European Christianity from the South.

This is a thorough grasp of the Nigerian cultural landscape which culminated in the amalgamation process of 1914, which some political and erstwhile Nigerian statesmen call a mistake. Greater conflict has been born in this aspect in which the Muslim-Arab league makes war to outwit the Christians. A lingua Franca then will have to play something like a re conciliatory role serving as a bridge between the two extremes to Islamic and Christian culture, alongside traditionalism which is neither Muslim nor Euro centric Christian. Any language chosen must have been adequately used as a linkup between the Muslims and Christians and those fundamental traditionalists who are neither here nor there. At present there is no such language that would qualify to meet this great need. Not even the oftentimes proposed "WAZOBIA" Assumed superiority in the cultural aspect of each of this two camps has meandered in to the political factor and of course colours the linguistic factor.

The Political Factor:

For any language to qualify as Nigeria's lingua Franca, that language should be politically neutral. This statement may appear to be a hallucination, for in reality no language will be absolutely politically neutral. The determinant factor then will be a thorough evaluation of the political history of Nigeria in which case one of the three major ethnic languages WAZOBIA would hit the mark, but parochial patriotism and tribal sentiment may destroy this bid. In Nigeria's political history, the Hausa in the North have been "born to rule" its intent to usurp power to suite its selfish machinations, its cunning attempt to Islamize Nigeria and its failure to hold Nigeria together politically is one sad odd against the adoption of Hausa language as Nigeria's lingua Franca. The North has been in power in Nigeria more than any ethnic group in the country.

The Yoruba alongside the Igbos have not

held any serious political position for a long time like the Hausa but in any case the Yoruba is better off than the Igbos. Yoruba is always blamed for an acclaimed cultural imperialism with a language that is meant to be the leading comprador faction of the ruling class". In the case of the Igbos, there is complete blackout as their role in the civil war and fear of that enchanted "Igbo domination hunts Nigeria like the Ghost of Caesar. The Igbo language will not qualify. The minority language s do infact stand a chance as none has generated any hatred, disagreement or rancor against any section of Nigeria. To buttress the relevance of a lingua franca further, either for Nigeria or for the whole of Africa, Professor Wole Soyinka, a member of Union of writers of the African peoples called for the adoption of Swahili as a lingua franca for the African continent. His reason was based on the premise that Swahili has a wide geographical spread and is spoken in East Africa, Zaire and parts of central Africa. It is alleged that this Language is neutral and does not belong to any ethnic group in particular.

Sometimes in the past Mr. Alex Igbineweka of the N.T.A (Nigerian Television Authority) equally saw the need for a lingua franca and pioneered a proposed language called GUOSA akin to WAZOBIA comprising vocabulary items from many Nigerian languages. His proposed list featured eight Nigerian languages. Examples of GUOSA expression quoted in Ndubuisi (1998) includes:

Nagode pupo "Thank you very much" (Which is a combination of Hausa and Yoruba).

Hutu owa na ukiti ombo. "There is a holiday next month" (Which is a combination of Hausa, Yoruba, Edo and Igbo)

Igbineweka's 52 page *GUOSA Dictionaries* of 1987 were distributed to constituent

assembly members on a promise of a second volume which will comprise 3000 head words. His work met with sharp and stern criticism as Elugbe writing in the *Newswatch Magazine* of March, 20 1989 noted that Igbineweka is not a complete dictionary of the language he proposed since he constantly has to toil away at expressing a new idea in *GUOSA*. In the same vein, Joseph Ushie, a lecturer of the language and study skills centre University of Cross River State, Uyo aptly recommended “Afrike - a minority language spoken by a few hundreds of people in Ogoja Cross River State as a lingua franca. Joseph Ushie in his view thinks that “Afrike” is quite harmless.

So to chose a National language, a lingua Franca, we must look at those things that would unite us, rather than those things that would tend to divide us. This view was aptly captured by the former head of state of Nigeria Olusegun Obasanjo, when he as head of government inserted “Hausa” “Igbo” and “Yoruba” into the 1979 constitution as national languages in order to enhance national unity and cohesion. Amayo (1983. 11) quoting Ikara (1981) stated that Obasanjo's main reason for doing this was to avoid the already embarrassing situation created in Nigerian political development by the use of English language goes to substantiate the fact that from Nigerian Independence or immediately after it, Nigerian leaders were aware of the need for a Lingua Franca based on one of our indigenous languages

The Linguistic Factor

These are two points to note in our consideration of the linguistic factor. These are as follows

- (a) That language is both divine and human and its dynamism has to be cultivated and adequately promoted
- (b) That language is the repository of a

people's culture, and that culture should lead to unity and national development. As there are many languages in Nigeria and of course much quarrel on which would become Nigeria's lingua Franca, the burden then lies on Nigerian leaders to come up with a definite language policy. A thorough grasp of Westermann and Bryan (1970) linguistic properties reveals one striking phenomenon- that any Nigeria language that would become a lingua Franca should be capable of being taught and learned and should have been extensively published. To this end any of the Niger Congo – the “Kwa” family languages may meet this linguistic demand; and will have to be accepted on the basis of love, right relationship and common national goal and identity. This is because within Nigeria and by its membership in to the Niger- Congo, the Kwa family languages are related to Yoruba, Igbo Efik, Edo Kambari and Tiv than to Hausa. Antagonism in Nigeria is or was not instituted by language or Linguistic diversity. It is the result of a more recent modern Eurocentric political, and economic rivalry.

The Religious Factor

Religion is the summation of a people's culture and its attitude towards existence. Religion here may be seen as that divine inner crave to actualize the purpose of existence, and that existence is embroiled in a peoples culture and its language. More wars have been fought in the name of religion than in any other course in human history. In Nigeria the political landscape is a religious war. The power hungry North which has held on to the reins of power since independence is seen as imposing its jihadist Muslim religion on the rest of the country. The highly decentralized Igbos would prefer a confederation of smaller independent states, each with its religion culture and language. They could become the

federating units of Nigeria, a loose confederation with a weak centre. The Igbo man's burden in Nigeria is not really which religion rules the country, which language or which tribe. The trouble lies in the fact that a certain group in the country is stopping someone or making it impossible for someone else to become the president of Nigeria. The North, lucky to have been at the helm of affairs since independence, believes that this is their religious right. This has generated much resentment against the Hausa, his religion and therefore his language. The more liberal and democratically decentralized Igbos would as a mark of their right to self determination prefer not to trade his right for a Muslim language and political domination. The inconsistent Yoruba watch on the fringe awaiting any opportunity to fall in no matter the side and the language. The minority languages, because their users are rarely in the forefront of Nigeria politics, sit below with an alarming hatred and condemnation of the ruling class. This hatred of one group against the other has plagued Nigeria unity to this day. The other situations mentioned in this brief treatise cannot be studied in complete isolation from the religious aspect. The two warring camps of religion in Nigeria - Islamism and Christianity - are in fact responsible for the lack of basic unity in the country and in the country's inability to choose a lingua franca based on one of our indigenous languages. If for instance the presidential position be rotated amongst the constituent zones of the federation, there will be mutual trust and a lingua franca will emerge no matter whose language it is.

National Development

Asogba (2001) as quoted in Ndubuisi (1998) has captured for us the essence of development as having economic cultural, social, religious and political implications without giving it a clear cut definition since it could be understood differently by different set of people. Okoroafor et al (2016) rather

think that development is the process of improving the living conditions of a people within a geographical area; and has to do with the improvement of the quality of life of the people. He stresses further, citing Rodney (1972) that development is a phenomenon inherent in all human societies. For our convenience, especially with respect to this paper, all other definition of development apply except that it adds the term "National" to its strata, making it a better, and broader way of evolving the talents latent in the population of Nigeria through the use of one language as a lingua Franca. At present no true national development exists in Nigeria, because English language which we think is spear heading this development is being influenced by Nigerian languages culminating in the different varieties of English now spoken in Nigeria: Pidgin, Broken, popular Nigeria English (PNE) etc, and these varieties do not even meet national or international intelligibility.

National development is therefore the growth of a country to meet political, social cultural, economic and even religious needs; human potential will have to be developed through education in other to meet this goal. This goal cannot be met without a National language. The term national language, hidden in the title of this paper, is in itself quite ambiguous. In the first place "National" may mean "Nigerian" and if that is so, then we would be referring to indigenous Nigerian languages, which is actually one of the motif in this paper. Secondly we may be referring to the national languages, Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba granted status by the 1979 constitution and these languages are national when we consider their geographic spread and the population of their users. A national language in this sense becomes a symbol of National integration and identity. This was Obasanjo's reason for inserting the WAZOBIA language into the 1979 constitution. It was short lived though

for lack of language experts (Bamgbose, 1982).

The need for a national language for national development has been the concern of major world powers down the centuries. Take for instance the example of former Soviet Union which gave recognition to the country's 130 languages. Desheriyev and Mikhalehko once stated that there is no official language in the Soviet Union. There is rather a language policy that recognizes equality of all the languages, as native languages were used in state institutions, organizations and co-operations. This may seem impossible for Nigeria only because the citizens do not have focused intention in implementing visions of high altruism that will enable them to develop their technological potential through the unifying power of one language which will be specifically theirs. In the former Soviet Union, names are Russian, news broadcast on either the radio or the television is in the native languages. Thus the ruler is able to reach the ruled at the grassroots. The same thing is applicable to France, Germany, Greece, etc. It does not really matter where regional varieties exist, or dialects which have broken off from parent indigenous languages. During the last World Cup competition, names of foreign players cannot be pronounced if you are not properly educated because they were written in their native languages. Their products and scientific inventions bear native names; Kawasaki, Samsung, Toyota, Ford etc. Back home to Africa children are named Abraham, Nicodemus, Michael, etc. Made in Nigeria products bear inscriptions like 'Made in Japan, Taiwan, France', etc. There is no emphasis on national pride because the uniting power of a common indigenous language is lacking and individual native languages are not even used. During the Nigerian Civil War, Ojukwu's war heroes invented a mass killer mine called "Ogbunigwe". So what is wrong in giving

Nigerian products native names deriving from the indigenous languages? There does not seem to be anything wrong with that.

The Solution:

Greenberg (1963) classifies the languages in the African continent in to only four. He termed it "The four major phyla namely: Afroasiatic khoisan, Niger-kordofanian and Nilo-Saharan. Actually three of these phyla languages are duly represented in Nigeria excluding the Khoisan language family. Greenberg's taxonomy insists to a large extent that the other languages in Nigeria belonging to different tribes or ethnic grouping revolve around these three. That means that there are only three languages in Nigeria which have developed regional dialects or varieties across the country and can unite in a one lingua franca for the sake of national development. Linguists have revealed that people who speak different languages can unite through a non linguistic "aspect of culture" This could be religion agriculture or commerce as reported by Elugbe (1982) who insist that ethnic groups do notice linguistic similarities in their languages and that Yoruba is linguistically related to the Igbos. The Hausa/ Fulani of Northern Nigeria are equally linguistically related even though these two tribes are essentially different. I had thought that Hausa is the same as Fulani. The Fulani speaks a language that belongs to the Niger-Congo family which is more related to Wolof and serer in Senegal than any language in Nigeria. In Nigeria, languages within the Niger Congo family are related; Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Edo, Kambari, and the Tiv language than to Hausa, yet there is a lateral line of oneness running through these languages. Historically, the Fulani conquered the Hausa and assimilated them though not completely, and leaving behind no known linguistic track or ties. Thus, these two tribes become for Nigeria, a role model architect of oneness, unity and solidarity. The Igbo language is

related to Efik or Ibibio and across the country, we run into one complex web of language family relationship. Therefore to reconcile the warring faction, the following points are necessary and recommended in order to expedite our effort in finding a lingua Franca for Nigeria:

- (a) A Presidential commission should be set up to screen the languages in Nigeria and come up with a “fair deal” on which one qualifies to be Nigeria's lingua Franca. The survey should concentrate on which language has been published more extensively in enhancing teaching and learning in the education sector, in the news media, and is quite widely spoken. This is what other countries like India and Tanzania did.
- (b) This project should be adequately funded by government, which must recruit language experts: linguists, historians, etc, to carry out this national assignment.

This does not mean the death of other minority languages which should be allowed and encouraged to flourish along the line.

- (c) The Federal Government should eschew tribal sentiment, and bias and should be honest enough in choosing a “common core” language for Nigeria.

The Federal Government should be dedicated enough to take a stand, and any language chosen should not be seen by other ethnic groups as a slight on their identity and citizenship. It should rather be seen as a sacrifice to tread the road to national unity.

- (d) Any language chosen should be enshrined in the constitution of Nigeria as our lingua Franca, to be used as a medium of instruction in our schools: primary, secondary, university etc. translators, authors, newscaster,

journalists can be encouraged to work in this language, with English only becoming optional according to need.

- (e) Our industries, investors, scientists, etc should manufacture products that should bear this language. The Chinese, French, Germans etc trade their products in their language. It can be done in Nigeria.

Conclusion

There are various arguments posited by academics, historians and politicians, that a lingua Franca will be easier for Nigeria if we go back to the former regional structure of government. This is not true. Nigerian leaders should find enough courage to implement lofty goals. It is now rather clear that no country will ever develop without a language or a common language it can really call its own. Though English language is Nigeria's official language, it certainly cannot be a substitute for a National language that will be born out of our numerous indigenous languages. This is the task ahead of all future Nigeria leaders. Nigeria is technologically backwards because of this lack of a lingua franca – a national language. A technological breakthrough for Nigeria will be dependent on solving this great language hurdle for as Tai Solarin once admitted in the Newswatch Magazine edition of March 1989, that his romance with Hausa as a lingua Franca is now over because it is not realistic and suggested that “whatever Nigerian language we chose will be psychologically a more acceptable language than any foreign language”.

REFERENCES

- Afolayan, A. (1976). The six Year Primary Project in Nigeria. In Bamgbose (ed.) *Mother Tongue Education: The West African Experience*. London and Paris: Hodder and UNESCO, 113-134.
- Afolayan, A. (1984). *Ife Studies in English as a Second Language*. A Mimeographed Document Privately Circulated.
- Amayo, A. (1983). The Search for National integration and National identity in Nigeria since Independence - the linguistic aspect paper presented at the National Conference on "Nigeria since Independence." A.B.U, Zaria, 28-31 March, 1983.
- Asogba, A. (2008). *Cross Currents in African Theatre*. Ibadan: Kraft book limited.
- Bamgbose, A. (1982). Local languages development policy and practice. In Ikara B. (ed.) *Nigerian Languages and Cultural Development*, pp 15-22. Lagos: National Language Centre.
- Brann, C.M.B (1980). *Mother Tongue, Other Tongue and Further Tongue*, Inaugural Lecture, University of Maiduguri Press.
- Brann, C.M.B. (1977). Multilingualism in Nigerian education. In Mackey, W.F. and J. Ornstein (Eds.) *Sociological studies in language contact*. The Hague: Mouton, 379-92.
- Elugbe, B. (Ed.) (1982). Linguistics and Prehistory in B.S. Chumbow. *Applied Linguistics in Africa*.
- Emenanjo, E. N. (Ed.) (1990). *Multilingualism: Minority Language and Language Policy in Nigeria*. pp.74-80.
- Essien, O. E. (1981). The Problems of Teaching West Africa Languages: The Ibibio Dimension. *The Nigerian Language Teacher*, 4: 225-11.
- Federal Ministry of Information (1977). *National Policy on Education*. Lagos: NERC Press.
- Greenberg, J. (1963). *Languages of Africa*. The Hague Mouton.
- Greenberg. J.H (Ed.) (1978). *Universals of Language*. Cambridge and London: M.I.T press.
- Ikara, B.A. (Ed.) (1981). *Nigerian Language and Cultural Development*. Lagos: National Language Centre.
- Ndubuisi, J.K. (1998). *Language and National development the Nigeria experience*. Wilbest Educational Publishers.
- Newswatch Magazine* (1989, March 20). pp.13-18.
- Okoroafor et al (2016). Implication of effective national integration for sustainable development in Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal for Strategic Research and Developmen*.1 (5), 99-116.
- Page, R.B. (1964). *The National Question*. Oxford: O.U.P.
- Westermann, D. & M. A. Bryan (1970) *Languages of West Africa*. London: O.U.P.