

THE DEVELOPMENT AND PRESERVATION OF NIGERIAN
LANGUAGES AND CULTURES:
THE ROLE OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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1. Introduction

The question as to the number of indigenous languages Nigerians use along with English has not been resolved. This, according to Emenanjo (1990: vi), is because "Nigeria is a classical multilingual mosaic in which minority languages, which are very many in number, live cheek-by-jowl with major languages which, at a micro level, are only three in number or, at a macro level, are nine or twelve in number." However, this paper considers both "major" and "minor" languages as Nigerian indigenous languages. Therefore, a significant distinction would not be made between those that have been labelled "major" (NPE 1977, 1981) and the rest which some people have labelled as "minor". While the Federal Government, in its language policy, has categorised three (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) as "major" languages out of over four hundred Nigerian local languages, Williamson (1990) made a brilliant list of 118 "minority" languages which have been found to have determinate geography and speakers as well as literature and potentials of being developed. In addition to the above languages, there must be other local languages spoken largely in some rural areas of the country, which have not yet been "discovered". And of course, there is the English language, which at present functions together with the so-called major Nigerian languages as the national language of the country. But the position, which English occupies in the country, is unique, though it does not function as a vehicle for expressing the indigenous cultures.

The exact number of Nigerian indigenous languages is not important in this paper. Rather, what is of paramount importance is the need to develop the lan-

guages and preserve them, so that the Nigerian indigenous cultures, which they preserve and transmit, will not suffer atrophy. The Local Governments in Nigeria have been identified as positive agents which can best champion the cause of developing and preserving Nigerian indigenous languages and culture.

2. An appraisal of the Nigerian language policy

Obanya (1980) had given a somewhat detailed critique of the entire Nigerian educational policy as contained in the National Policy on Education (1977) but the area that will be examined in this paper is the language provisions which he omitted in his appraisal of the policy. The relevant sections of the language provisions of the 1981 edition of the National Policy on Education are as follows (all italics mine):

- A. In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process, and *as a means of preserving the people's culture* the government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother tongue. In this connection, the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (NPE §8).
- B. To achieve the above objectives, government will, among other things ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community; and to this end will (a) develop the orthography for many more Nigerian languages, and (b) produce text-books in Nigerian languages (NPE §11 (3)).
- C. Government will see to it that 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 §4).
- D. The curriculum at the secondary school level must include indigenous languages: In selecting two Nigerian languages, students should study the languages of their own and in addition to any of the three main Nigerian languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, *subject to availability of teachers* (NPE §19 (4)).

In the above excerpts from the National Policy on Education, it is clear that the provisions are well related to the national educational objectives, namely preservation of the people's culture and achievement of national unity. That language serves to preserve people's cultures cannot be faulted, since culture itself is transmitted via language (Hymes 1964; Onwuanibe 1980). It is therefore commendable that the government had recognised this fundamental truth and as-

signed to the Nigerian languages the role of preserving the Nigerian culture. However, the link between language and national unity is not direct but rather tenuous (Akindele and Adegbite 1992). This is because, while a common language can engender social cooperation and integration among speakers, the same thing cannot be said of national unity. The fact that a group of people speak the same language does not mean that they are united. So, the recognition given to these "major" languages as the official national languages cannot ensure that the Nigerian state will be united. The languages, of course, do not enjoy nationwide acceptability since the other ethnic groups in the country have their own languages through which their culture is preserved. In order to achieve unity in the Nigerian state, the national leaders owe it a duty to create a positive awareness in the individual and society towards national commitment and mass mobilisation for developmental tasks. They also owe it a duty to provide good leadership for the people they serve in order to eliminate the communication gap and mutual distrust between them and the people (Akindele and Adegbite 1992).

In addition, the policy of using the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment as the medium of instruction in pre-primary (nursery) school and at a certain stage in primary school is well informed and it is a sure way of developing the Nigerian indigenous languages. But the possibility of the policy being implemented at the nursery-school level is very doubtful. The present pre-primary schools in Nigeria are seen and are run as elitist schools where greater attention is given to the English language. In fact, many well-to-do parents send their children to nursery schools in order for the children to acquire "good" English. So the aim of the Federal Government to institute the use of mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment at the pre-primary school stage may be defeated, unless the government takes a step to, first of all, popularise the indigenous languages and develop them to a stage where they will be able to cater for the needs of the pupils in their various subjects.

In the same vein, indigenous languages are to be used henceforth in the primary schools. This provision has been criticised severally by many experts due to certain vague phrases in which it is couched. For instance, Akindele and Adegbite (1992) question the workability of using the mother tongue as medium of instruction at the lower primary, and English at "a later stage". How do we effect a smooth transition? How can a child who has never been exposed to a language (in this case a foreign language) suddenly begin to learn the language with success? And again, how does the government intend to realise the objectives of permanent literacy and numeracy? Another grey area in the provisions is the phrase "subject to availability of teachers". This unwittingly exposes the governments unseriousness and ill-preparedness. If the government is aware that there might not be teachers to teach these languages, intensive and serious provision should have been made for the training of the teachers, if the provision is

to achieve the desired results. In the same vein, the implementation of the language provisions of the policy has not been handled properly by the government. In the policy, the government realised the need to develop more Nigerian languages and produce textbooks in such languages. But it has remained a thing of conjecture about when and how actually the government intends to achieve those two objectives, namely smooth transition from primary to secondary school and ensuring permanent literacy and numeracy in the pupils. The statement of development in the Universities Departments of Linguistics and State Ministries of Education mentioned in the National Policy on Education (NPE 11 (36)) has never been pursued with a serious political will. This is because apart from some works done on the so-called major Nigerian languages, not many local languages have really been developed in the Universities' Departments of Linguistics and State Ministries of Education. In support of this submission, Chumbow (1990: 67) says: "The development in the University Departments of Linguistics mentioned in the policy are, to my knowledge, essentially, individual efforts that do not as yet benefit from government financial or material support nor are these efforts systematically co-ordinated in the direction of the desired government policy."

Chumbow (1990: 68) even castigates the government on the establishment of the Language Centre, set up as part of the educational services mentioned in the NPE and asks: "To what extent has the centre achieved the dual goal of the educational policy with respect to the use of the mother tongue in education namely: (a) to develop orthographies for many more Nigerian languages, and (b) to produce textbooks in Nigerian languages?"

The task-force set up by the government to translate the policy into a workable blue-print that should guide the bodies whose duty it is to implement the policy, submitted its report but the latter is yet to see the light of the day. The present scenario in Nigeria could be seen as the absence of a definite language policy for the country. Rather, what we have is "language provisions" contained in the National Policy on Education. And, until a proper planning of the languages in use in the country is done, assignment of roles and implementation of various language provisions will continue to be faulty.

Notwithstanding all these failures, if the government has not performed well as regards the provisions and their implementation, it should at least be commended for the laudable provisions, in respect of language and education in Nigeria. Therefore, the good intention of the government should not be allowed to die, because developing indigenous languages is the only assurance people have for the preservation of their cultures. It is then suggested that the local government councils in Nigeria, which are closer to the masses of the people that speak these languages, and which are seen as the custodians of the indigenous cultures, could be given the responsibility of overseeing the development of indigenous

languages in their areas of operation so as to nurture and preserve the many cultures in Nigeria.

3. The need to develop Nigerian languages and cultures

Nigeria, unarguably, is the most populous country on the continent of Africa. As a result of this, the country is blessed with very many languages, with some only being used by pockets of speakers, while some have very significant numbers of speakers. A corollary of this is that there are very many cultures tied closely with these languages, the survival of which depends largely on the use to which the languages are put. If the languages are neglected, as is the case at present with many indigenous Nigerian languages, the cultures which are preserved in these languages will die off naturally. On the other hand, the more active the languages are (through being used), the better for the cultures.

Language has been described as a vehicle for thought (Sapir 1929). And a nation's culture is largely reflected through the thoughts of its people. So for a culture to remain alive, the language(s) through which it is transmitted should be preserved. Language again powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes (Sapir 1929; Whorf 1974). Social problems confronting the communities are also solved through language. In fact, it is as a vehicle of culture that language functions as an instrument of human development. In Akindele and Adegbite's (1992: 6) view, "the individual's experience of reality is functionally dependent upon the language and linguistic behaviour of a given society". We therefore submit in this paper that the Nigerian indigenous languages should not be treated with scorn, but be accorded respect in line with their significant role of preserving the indigenous cultures. It is a known fact that English is a national language of the country, but the indigenous culture cannot be reflected or preserved through it. This is because English is a foreign language and no amount of domestication can make it adequately reflect Nigeria's diverse traditional beliefs, norms, arts, etc. It has been observed that there are many instances of the physical environment of a society being reflected in its language, normally in the structure of its lexicon – the way in which distinctions are made by means of single words (Trudgill 1971).

Culture, according to Onwuanibe (1980: 61), is: "The ensemble of activities of state of a people's development with regard to intellectual, aesthetic, religious, moral, scientific and technical achievements, and the environment which furthers them from man's creative spirit as he poses and endeavours to answer questions around and beyond himself. It is man's way of life as he meets his physical and spiritual needs."

Therefore, the multilingual and multicultural nature of the country should be seen as a blessing rather than a curse since the rich diverse cultures will make the country impervious to erosion from foreign cultural influences that may be

inimical to her moral values and national interest. Countries all over the world are turning back to their rich cultural heritage with a view to exporting the best aspects to generate foreign currency. Nigeria cannot be an exception. Thus, a country like Nigeria with relatively few of her citizens literate in English cannot toy with the idea of seeking to replace all the indigenous languages with the English language whose native speakers' culture remains largely esoteric and foreign. From the foregoing, it is imperative that these languages be developed in order to keep alive the cultures they project. A nation that watches its language die is at the same time killing its culture. And when a nation loses its culture, it may no longer have a basis for existence.

Onwuanibe (1980) contends that technology is part of culture and that a nation with a virile culture is just an inch away from being a superpower in the world of technology. He explains that while culture is a holistic phenomenon, technology refers to man as a tool-making creature. By helping man to control nature, thereby helping man to maintain and enhance the quality of his life, technology is an indispensable part of culture. We may then say that Nigeria remains a technologically backward nation, not because it has not recorded any feat in the field of technology, but because it lacks developed indigenous language(s) through which its technological feats could be recorded, processed and transmitted to the world at large. What the country should do to make her impact felt in the technological world is to nurture its indigenous languages so that her technological feats being expressed in a foreign language will be saved from international pilfering. After all, Japan, for example, is today a technological giant as a result of the promotion of its indigenous language through which her technology is sold to the world. Given that some of the Nigerian indigenous languages, which include the so-called major ones, have been developed to some extent with regard to orthography, the government should act decisively and map out standardisation strategies for these languages. Emenanjo (1990) states that work on the writing systems for Nigerian languages must be carefully and democratically carried out at the local and/or state levels before such systems can be standardised and made official by the National Language Centre (NLC).

The government itself has acknowledged the importance of a language in the preservation of the peoples' culture (NPE: §8). The development and preservation of these languages, as a way of preserving the national heritage is very imperative. According to Linton (1947), "The culture of a society is the way of life of its members; the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation. To a large degree, culture determines how member of a society think and feel; it directs their actions and defines their outlook."

We acquire knowledge of the social and cultural values of our societies through languages in which such social and cultural values are preserved. The

loss of these languages will mean the loss of such values. Also, the constraints, which the society imposes on behaviour, including language behaviour, are some of the societal norms and values that are preserved in our indigenous languages. Another area of a symbiotic relationship between language and culture is taboo. According to Akindele and Adegbite (1992), taboo is associated with things, which are not said, or in particular with words and expressions which are not used. The types of words that are tabooed in a particular language are a reflection of at least part of the system of values and beliefs of the society in question.

The local councils which form the third tier in the government system and which are closer enough to the rural people where most of the indigenous languages are spoken are in the best position to know these languages, to identify and assemble them through the cooperation of the local populace. Developmental tasks can then be mapped out for the languages by the appropriate authorities within the local councils. The whys and hows of this task will be discussed in the next part of the paper.

4. The role of the local government in the preservation and development of Nigeria's indigenous languages

The function of language planning, development and assignment of roles is on the exclusive list of the Federal Government of Nigeria. That is the reason why the development and assignment of roles to existing languages in the country has always been the responsibility of the government at the centre. As an exercise of this power, the government has made some laudable provisions in relation to language planning, development and functions as contained in the National Policy on Education (1977, 1981). But since the federal government has so much in its hands, the implementation of many of these important language provisions has always been left in the hands of the ministries, parastatals and institutes, most of which lack the bite and wherewithal to handle such functions. This, from recent history, has not been in the interest of the nation.

It then becomes imperative to explore ways by which the local councils in Nigeria can share from the Herculean tasks of the federal government in this line, since they are very close to the rural people that speak most of the local languages in Nigeria.

There have been several reforms on Nigerian local government administration since independence. Various proposals on how to improve the local government system and make it more viable have been made by experts, and several of these proposals have been adopted by successive governments at the centre (see Adamolekun 1977; Gboyega 1987, 1995; Ola 1977; Olowu 1990; Ayoade 1995). However, none of almost all the reforms already proposed, considers the importance of the language in the preservation of people's cultural values, beliefs and traditional knowledge. The culture of a people is tied to the language(s)

they speak. Local councils are established primarily to develop the local communities, where more than three quarters of the population live (Odenigwe 1977). Without contention, most of the inhabitants of the rural towns and villages rely mostly on their local languages. It follows, then, that there are no development plans which the local council can initiate without first considering how to preserve people's cultural values vis-à-vis the language(s) they speak.

Ayoade (1995: 25) itemises the constitutional roles expected of a local council in Nigeria as follows:

- (a) the provision and maintenance of primary education;
- (b) the development of agriculture and natural resources, other than the exploitation of minerals;
- (c) the provision and maintenance of health services;
- (d) such other functions as may be conferred on a local government council by the House of Assembly of the state.

Looking critically at the items above, we could see that the local councils cannot exercise any duty as regards language planning or development in Nigeria unless such a duty is stated under (d) above in the form of a delegated legislation from the State National Assembly. But the recent history of the country under military regimes has made this mostly unrealisable. It is only very recently that the nation moved back to popular democracy.

Therefore, to make the involvement of the local councils in the language matters realisable, we will like to propose the following:

(a) Restructuring of the local councils

That the local councils be restructured so as to have a specific department and a specific team of local experts for local language development and local culture definition and articulation. With the country now back as a fully democratised nation, the local councils could be restructured in such a way that would be specific roles for the numerous elected officers at the local government level. For instance, the councillors that were elected from various wards within the local government could be given the responsibility of collating of the local languages within their areas. Most recently, these officers have cried out about joblessness and about being irrelevant in the local government affairs. Such local languages assembled could then be put together for a specific committee formed within the local government to scrutinise and review appropriately. Again, a department for the development of local languages could also be created within the education department of all local councils. The head of the education department, who may be a career civil servant or a Supervisory Councilor for Education, could then oversee the work being done by the committee of the councillors.

(b) Creation of special schools and colleges

That the local council could set up special schools or colleges in their own localities to train youths and teachers trainers in a selected majority local language (with emphasis on vocabulary, grammar, syntax, etc.) in preparation for making it a future lingua franca for the local/district/state catchments. This proposal is strongly recommended to the local councils where there are endangered indigenous languages. These languages could be preserved with the establishment of such schools where the languages could be developed and nurtured. As long as there are people using a language, its culture will still be alive. It is also proposed that the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) in Aba, Abia State, could help in this direction. It could help to train personnel for such special schools established. It could also assist to monitor the progress of such schools in any part of the country. In addition, the so-called major Nigerian languages (Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa) could also be addressed in such schools with a view to making any one of them a future lingua franca for Nigeria. The local councils could also be encouraged to make research grants available to scholars in Nigerian universities for comparative studies in indigenous languages.

(c) Provision of additional income for the Local Councils

Since we know that this new role will stretch the financial resources of the local councils, they could cost the expenditure items related to local language and culture development and promotion for inclusion in the total annual budget they present to the central (state or federal) government. This will make their agitation for more funding from the federation account more justifiable. Alternatively, the local council could simply spend resources locally available and then bill the federal government. (This is because, presumably, the central government is better resourced than the local government and should thus be expected to subsidise the local government efforts!).

(d) Working alliance with State Universities

Lastly, one of the reasons for the establishment of state universities is to cater for the developmental needs of the local populace within the state. Part of this is to help the immediate community in its efforts to develop its languages and promote its cultural values. Therefore, the specific committees on language development in local councils can work closely with state universities in their region, which could then team up and render their expertise in developing the local languages and promoting local cultures.

5. Conclusion

It has been shown clearly in this paper that Nigeria is a multilingual-multicultural society and essentially plurilingual with English and several indigenous languages. These local languages are not adequately recognised or utilised and are almost neglected. But language does not exist in a vacuum. Essentially, language is seen as an institution within a culture where it co-occurs with other institutions and activities shared by the people. Thus there is a need to develop these languages and, by implication, save the nation's cultures from liquidation. It is equally submitted that there is need for a comprehensive language policy for the country in place of the hurried and scanty provisions in the National Policy on Education (NPE 1981).

However, due to the federal government's inability to single-handedly monitor the development of the local languages, it is suggested that the local councils share in the role. Some proposals for action are also suggested. Generally, we feel that, with adequate mobilisation and support, handy and manageable data, together with communal zeal and a competitive local spirit, the local governments should have greater commitment to developing local languages than the federal government. According to Robert Dahl (1961), a political scientist, "different levels of government are most competent to address various tasks".

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