



The Effects of the English Language on the Nigerian Culture

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Abstract

It is generally believed that when languages come in contact there are certain influences. Even though English has helped in creating job opportunities and making Nigerians global citizens, it has left in its trail a foreign culture with a damaging impact on the indigenous Nigeria culture. What obtains is a refractory perception of our culture, language, job definition, moral values, self-worth, and sense of worship, inter-personal relationship and respect for human life. This paper proposes the development of indigenous languages alongside English arguing that failure to document these languages will not only kill the languages, but will also kill the positive values preserved in these languages. It proposes that indigenous languages should be documented, so as to retain and propagate cultural information which is fast dying out. It is hoped that the current tendencies in indecent dressing, disrespect, sharp practices, senseless kitting and advance fee fraud which are considered as easy routes to success will give way to order and decorum, industry, creativity and inquisitiveness for superior knowledge driven by our culture and environment.

Keyword: Culture, Language, English language, Nigeria

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Introduction

African linguists have clamoured over the years for the development of indigenous languages. Nigerian linguists, such as Bamgbose (61), Essien (90) and Ndimele (85), have canvassed for the development of indigenous languages, especially, minority languages, before they go into extinction.

It is a well-known maxim among linguists that all languages are equal. No language is inferior to another, in as much as every language serves the communication needs of its speakers. This view is consolatory to the extent that every native speaker of a language has some sense of pride in the instructive value of his language. However, "languages are equal only before God and the linguist" Mackey (43).

In as much as every language has well defined structure and the potentials to serve communication needs of the speakers, there are functional variables which determine the status of a language. In language development, government policy on language is important. If government policy, as it is in Nigeria, favours the enthronement and use of a foreign language instead of indigenous languages, then indigenous languages lose their social significance, even among the native speakers who would otherwise have wanted to read and write in them.

Value judgment, such as the socio-economic benefits of learning a language, does arise. What results from this is a comparative advantage of what learning English rather than indigenous languages is likely to attract to the learners in Nigeria. A friend of mine once scolded his ward for failing English, which he is in dire need of to be able to move ahead in life, only to earn a credit pass in Igbo which holds no value to his future life. Such is the extreme disparagement of indigenous languages compared to the fray for English. However, the people's culture dies when their language dies. This is what is happening to most of Nigerian culture and tradition, because our language is dying on a daily basis.

The Dominance of English

In Nigeria, as in most African countries colonized by Britain, English is the official language, the language of instructions in schools and the language of media. With the advent of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, English has become the language of preaching, prayer, songs and worship. Indigenous languages are gradually consigned to traditional religion. It is slowly turning to a tool for the expression of cultural thoughts and activities, for pouring of libations, and the coronation of chiefs and traditional rulers. With the current trend, other traditional practices will soon be carried out in English. So the gods and the ancestors must better understand English.

English is a dominant language in Nigeria even when it does not control the highest population of speakers as Hausa does in Nigeria. However, due to the socio-economic and educational values that government has placed on it, those who speak English find themselves in positions of authority. Anyone aspiring to attain an enviable status concludes that the only path to wealth, influence and power is through the knowledge of English.



Government policies promote the growth of English. English is a prerequisite subject at a credit pass to earn a university admission in Nigeria. To earn government employment, even at the lowest level as a cleaner, one must have a passing knowledge of at least spoken English. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) clearly specifies that English is the language of the National Assembly with the addendum that it should be used alongside the languages of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The workability of this policy is not in doubt. It automatically gives an edge to English to continue to flourish since English is the only common medium of communication in this circumstance given that it is the language of education. The National Assembly is an assemblage of those who are educated in English.

English has virtually dominated the world to the extent that countries, which otherwise regarded English as one of those languages of Europe, are gradually readjusting their positions by implanting English in their domains to enjoy part of the effect of globalization. English is the language of information and communications technology.

Fishman (28) observes that the world is linguistically dominated by English almost everywhere, regardless of how well-established and well-protected local cultures, languages and identities may otherwise be (28).

Fishman had earlier stated that (English) is less loved but more used, (it) gets along without love, without sighs, without tear and without affects of any kind (and), loved or not, it works and few indeed can afford to knock it. (20).

Considering the hegemony of English as a world language, the official language in Nigeria and some African countries across all cultures, commerce, industry, technology, banking, etc, the task of developing indigenous languages is more arduous, a task not likely to be realized. In Nigeria, government merely makes policies for the development of indigenous languages without the political will to ensure compliance and proper implementation. For instance what could be seen as language policy formulation in Nigeria is reflected in the National policy on Education (1981). The mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment is to be used as the language of instruction at the pre-primary and the first three years of primary education while English is taught as a subject. After primary 3, the policy states that English becomes the language of instruction while Igbo is taught as a subject.

Tragically, most of those who make the policies are the very ones who hinder the implementation. They do not want their children to speak their mother tongue, neither do they tolerate the teaching of any indigenous language to their children. Their usual argument is that mother tongue education will hamper the effective acquisition of English. This, in turn, will affect their academic performance and the attainment of appreciable social status which English confers on the users in the society. Most linguists in Nigeria even prefer to have their children educated in the English language rather than the mother tongue. They are caught in the linguistic ambivalence to keep the mother tongue



while at the same time wishing to share in the trimmings English offers. Most educated Nigerians do not want their children to speak the mother tongue even at home. This writer once asked a colleague why her children never spoke their local language. She retorted, “For what? Of what value? Of what economic benefit? Tell me! They don’t need it”. Every native speaker of a language is endowed with native intelligence, which cannot be absorbed from any foreign language, no matter how central the foreign language is to the life of the people.

Writing, Policy and Commitment

Writing gives added impetus to a language. Writing is a convenient way of preserving a language. Writing is the most significant growth element of a language. It does not only carry cultural information but most importantly, transmits culture. Writing expands the world view of a people but serves as the repertoire for the storage, transmission and propagation of a people’s norms, tradition, religion and so on. A French critique, Jacques Derrida (44), describes writing as *the wandering outcast of linguistics*; while Householder (86) makes reference to Leonard Bloomfield as having remarked that language is basically speech, and writing is of no theoretical interest”.

The view was that writing was inconsequential to language, therefore not enough to be considered as a serious subject of scholarship. With industrial revolution and the advent of printing, it was no longer safe to hold such a view about writing. Globalization in the world and the growth of information technology have brought to the fore the benefits of language documentation and the dangers of not writing a language. The fast growing influence of English in Nigeria is due to the element of writing the language has.

Language Plan for the African Union proposed the adoption of indigenous languages in the businesses of the continent. Decades after the proposal, proceedings at the meetings of the continent (union) are still conducted in the colonial vestiges of English, French and Arabic. As stated earlier on the Nigeria National Policy on Education, government wants indigenous languages to serve as the language of instruction in the first three years in school, after which, English takes over. By implication, English is the language of instruction in school from primary four to all the levels of higher education. In as much as this policy does not support sufficiently the use of indigenous languages as media of communication in schools, most urban schools ignore this policy while government does not bother about non-compliance. At the moment, most indigenous languages have become languages of traditional religions, what Latin and Greek are to the Catholic Church.

A Case for Mother Tongue

English does not have to be the dominant language in Nigeria. A policy of English only as silently sustained cripples the very essence of Nigerians as a people, the very people it is designed to serve. Grin canvasses that in as much as learning English is desirable, it is proper to make English the sole official language explaining that: an English only policy would therefore be tantamount to throwing



away this component of our quality of life and of the quality of life of the generations that will follow us. (75)

It is vital to preserve any language a person speaks, not only for cultural purpose as Bamgbose suggests, but also *for social and economic growth and development* (29).. If European nations use indigenous languages for economic and technological developments while learning and speaking English as a global language, nothing is principally wrong in doing so in Nigeria with the indigenous languages. In Nigeria, failure to do this has given rise to alienation from our culture and environment with a concomitant incapacitation of our creative ability and integrity. It has left us with a refracted mentality. Since every language can be enriched to play the role its speakers want it to play, indigenous languages should be taught in schools with primers and written literatures and wholly documented for posterity. Gradually, it will expand and be enriched through vocabulary building to accommodate inventions though not as a rival to English.

Language and Cultural Transmission

Developed nations build their technologies and growth on the platform of culture named in modern parlance as ideology. It is a framework of positive attributes which serve as a driving force for wealth creation, decent living, health care, decent accommodation, friendly environment, and the right to education, freedom of worship and the right to self-expression.

In Nigerian culture, everybody is his brother's keeper. Indigenous language is, therefore, not only used for communication but also for intimate interaction. The current wave of hegemony of English results in the internalization and engraving of foreign culture in our psyche. It signals the death of the culture of honesty, respect for human life, brotherhood, industry and hard-work, self-worth, hospitality. Camaraderie among others. When Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe killed during the week of peace, he was banished from his clan for seven years. When he killed the Whiteman, his people deserted him. Such reactions were based on the people's culture of tolerance, self-control and ancestral oppositions to senseless killings and disobedience to law and order.

No Nigerian culture encourages stealing by tricks expressed in modern parlance as '419', neither does it subscribe to stealing under any guise. None of the cultures tolerate killing whether through provocation or political motivation as prevalent these days. None of our cultures hink izes child trafficking which is modern day slave trade after it was successfully abolished by white men who motivated it. None of our cultures encourage leadership by exclusion whereby a clique of privileged few gangs up to oppress the underprivileged majority by virtue of birth, position and geographical region. None of our cultures fan the embers of enthronement of might and subjugation of the weak. How then did these cultures come to us?



It is common to hastily push the blame on globalization and modernism. We should note that with English language came a presumed modern way of doing things subsequently overblown by globalization.

Ekah points out that: globalization is breaking down barriers of ignorance in different parts of the world, orchestrating hard-work, research inquisitiveness and industry and providing easy access to global information.(62).

Gnutzmann calls English: the linguistic communicative correlate of globalization[^] 1591 English has exerted tremendous influence on the cultural life of Nigeria. Through globalization, we can make references to responsible leadership in United States of America, Britain and other parts of Europe. Culture of discipline, good governance, transparency, accountability, honesty, dedication to service and industry are prevalent in Western societies where English predominates. In addition, law and order are not compromised while the drive for excellence is astute. There are also positive values Nigeria as a nation can gain from globalization and the twin sister, English.

In Europe and Asia, language and culture are the bedrock of development. In Africa, English, French, Portuguese, Spanish and Arabic, are erroneously considered the proud symbols of development. Some parents want to acquire the colonial language of his environment and insists the children should acquire same. Preference for mother tongue is for domestic use and beyond this is disgust. The disgust is so grave that students who are offered admission into Department of Nigerian languages against their choice struggle to change. If they cannot, they forfeit such admissions.

Documenting Indigenous Languages

Culture is basically a way of life of the people, Embedded in culture is language which is a carrier of the people's way of doing things, their world view, marriage rites and cultural ethos transmitted from one generation to another. The death of any language is the extinction of generations of speakers of that language. For this reason, many human communities jealously safeguard their languages. Dangerously though, these languages are not documented for preservation. To safeguard a language is to document it in the form of writing. Documenting a language is just the threshold while teaching the language is a more enduring legacy. The inability to develop indigenous languages does not only endanger the languages but most importantly endangers the culture of the people.

We need to realize that language documentation is not just about preserving languages as a means of communication but also for cultural preservation. Language is the milk which nurtures the human spirit. When the spirit is destroyed, the human essence is destroyed. The destruction of the Nigerian spirit via the English language is so grave that the psyche of an average Nigerian is dominated by English and European cultures. He is suspended between his cultural ethos and the foreign culture which he has not fully penetrated. He needs his language to stand firm on the very culture which kept



his ancestors whole. We eat pounded yam but pounding machine comes from Europe. We have not tried to improve upon the age long mortar and pestle because of the craze for ready-made products.

English language changes the mentality of the African people who speak it. English language has affected the mentality of African speakers to the extent that it makes them tilt towards European concepts, standards and social milieu. English language has subtly forced the Nigerian to think like the white, similar to what French policy of Assimilation does to Franco-phone Africans.

What is responsible for this is that language controls all aspects of human life and consciousness. It is the fulcrum of a people's consciousness. We tend to think as the whites do expect for native intelligence which every language is unable to transmit because it is tied to the culture of the people and the environment.

Most African languages will soon disappear because our children are not taught these languages neither are they interested in learning them. Our children can no longer count in their mother tongue neither do they know the proverbs and wise saying which harbour cultural wisdom. English has absorbed us psychologically, physically and culturally. Because English has a written form, it exerts both direct and indirect influences on our culture. English has changed the language of our public discourse. It has buried the mores, orature and cultural norms of the people.

Language and identity

English has successfully violated the balance and harmony in our society so much that the people no longer see themselves in their native language and culture, instead, the foreign tongue is the mirror through which we look at ourselves. The Nigerian race is exposed to mortal danger because we spite indigenous languages. What English language does is to change the mentality of the speakers. It changes the cultural values to the level of subservience and blind loyalty to a language and culture that enslaved us.

The Nigerian constitution stipulates that English, the language of our colonial masters and indeed a second language to Nigeria is our official language. Paragraphs 51 and 91 of the 1979 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria further confirm the status of English as follows:

The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English language and in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made (paragraph 51). The business of the State Houses of Assembly shall be conducted in English but the house may in addition to English conduct the business of the house in one or more other languages spoken in the state..... (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1979 Paragraph 91).

The State House of Assembly at Awka, Anambra State stipulates that Wednesdays are set apart for the use of Igbo language in their deliberations in the house. The surprising thing is that the members would dress properly in native attires on Wednesdays but the language used is more of English language than Igbo. They code-switch from the local language Igbo to the English language.



Omachoun (124) cites Herbert Prochnous as saying that there is a time when we must firmly choose the course we will follow, or drift of events will make the decision. Ekah opines that:

because there is Aja Amsterdam in Holland, then it must be Ajax Cape Town in South Africa Because it is Premier League in England, it must be Premier League in Nigeria as if it would not be as strong and as versatile if it goes by the name Super League. Because there is European Union, then it must be African Union. Because it is Bush House in London, then it must be Bush House in Nigeria. Because it is prime Time Jaz in London, it has to be prime Time Jamz in Nigeria. Since there is London Times, there must be Daily times. (87).

Even in local football matches, the names of big football teams in Europe are adopted and used in local competitions. One begins to wonder what AC Milan, Manchester United, Chelsea, Barcelona, Real Madrid, and Arsenal are doing in local football competitions. The mentality behind the blind imitation is that such names portend success, strength and resoluteness and adopting such names in village competitions, in their belief, gives character and strength to the players and the team. This shows that African world view is built on English language and its expressions. Success is tailored towards European approach. We no longer think independently, All our thoughts and judgments are based on European standards. We blindly imitate rather than adapt the positive values to suit our environment and. Culture. As Bamgbose (8) points out: It is necessary to allow English exist while maintaining our languages, if not for anything, at least for our cultural purposes. We desire English to belong to the global world, but we need our languages to stabilize as a people

The English language has not only killed the intrinsic values of indigenous languages but has brought apathy to the developmental tools. Above all, it has successfully destroyed our sensibility and pride as a people. Sense of industry and the Strength of accomplishment, which made blacks the preferred slaves because of their power and resilience are no longer exploited. Within the indigenous languages are wise sayings, proverbs, songs and moonlight stories which are educative and motivational with moral lessons. The English our children speak these days is devoid of idioms and wise sayings as it was when the whiteman taught the language to non-native speakers in Nigeria. With English comes neo-colonialism. National football competitions are designed to fall in line with Europe. The home-based players are not considered as good as the foreign based players. We adopt European football calendar instead of creating a conducive atmospheres and an enabling environment for local talents to thrive. So many traditional values are lost. Traditional birth attendants normally used a certain herb to stop hemorrhage in a woman in labour by squeezing the herb, dropping the juice on the head, the eyes and the toes of the women and then mixed the herb for the woman to drink. With that, the hemorrhage stopped automatically. The stem of a particular plant was also normally used to push in the pile, and then a dose of a mixture of the herb in water healed the patient completely. Because of lack of documentation, these traditional therapies have died with the traditional medicine practitioners while



we are busy pursuing proficiency in English and orthodox medicine. The very things we are looking for in English and its world are lying unexploited in our culture. With sincere commitment to language documentation, all the traditional wisdom in health care delivery and protection of the environment which kept our forefathers to octogenarians and centurions would be developed and moved to global level. We are so crippled by English and its influences that our thinking facilities are infirmed. We neither have a firm grasp of the Whiteman's technological know-how nor knowledge of the advanced traditional wisdom of our forefathers. English gives us levitating success without a cultural base for sustenance.

Recommendations

I hereby recommend that our native languages should be added to the subject taught in Nigerian schools so that it will help keep our culture and tradition. Because culture and tradition work hand in hand with the language of the people.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that English has altered our moral values in intra-and interpersonal relations. It has provided the platform for communication within and across linguistic borders. Speakers of English are not merely consumers of the rudiments of the Language but are also affected by the social life of the language. We have abandoned the positive values that English language offered and picked the negative vices. The culture of hard work and creativity is abandoned for ready made technology which rather than solve our socio-economic and political problems, multiply them. We imagine that English is the language of civilization resulting in resentment for indigenous languages as if these languages are incapable of serving as the media of inquisitiveness, research and superior knowledge. The bottom-line is that English has succeeded in presenting Nigerians with a refracted image of themselves. It has left a deep crisis in the individual who is constantly trying to define himself within imported culture and language. He constantly asks himself: who am I? Where do I live? What food do I eat? What dress do I wear? What job do I do? What God do I worship? What values do I hold? The answers swing the individual in one direction or another to the detriment of the society.



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