A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA: ROLES AND PROBLEMS

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Abstract
This paper explores the historical overview of the English language in Nigeria stating its roles while proffering solutions to the problems. The English language has attained an enviable height not minding the colonial vestiges left on it. It has been adopted as a national language since it is the only language commonly used by everybody as a medium of communication. Amidst this, there are some linguistic problems associated with its usage which include: multilingualism, emergence of Creole, code variation and so on. To arrest these situations, emphasis should be placed on the mother tongue as a first language; English should be taught and emphasized as a second language. The Federal Government should establish a National English Language Centre to promote its usage.

English language did not come to Nigeria just on its own. Its incursion into Nigeria was caused by lots of factors like trading, slavery, colonization and missionary activities in Nigeria by the Europeans and this was done in phases. As such English as a language is a borrowed blanket which has been converted to a personal use by the borrowers so as to suit their purpose.

Nigeria is a multilingual nation which its citizens have to speak more than a language in order to interact properly with other Nigerians. In the midst of these different languages, one of the languages is most widely used than the other languages because of its prestige. This prestige laden attitudinal differential is in favour of English language. This paper therefore discusses from a historical point of view, the English language in Nigeria while paying attention to its origin, functions, problems as well as recommendations to the problems discussed.

The Origin of the English Language in Nigeria
The exact date that English language usage started in Nigeria is not certain. It is however believed that the first infinite contact between the British and some ethnic groupings in Nigeria was in Southern Nigeria. This was some period before the Atlantic slave trade. As from 1553 English men paid frequent visits to the Nigeria shores, especially the ports of ancient Benin and old Calabar, and the type of communication...
which evolved between the English men and the Nigerians was a simplified kind of
communication in English called pidgin.

Nevertheless, Portuguese and not English was the earliest European language to
be used in Nigeria. According to Adetugbo (1984), a certain Oba in Benin was reported
to have spoken Portuguese. The language was in use for economic interest and because
it was the language of commerce and diplomacy in the ancient Benin kingdom.

The origin of the English language can be classified into three major periods
namely: the period before colonialism, the period during colonialism and the
period after amalgamation of the southern and northern protectorates.

English in Nigeria Before Colonialism

As early as 15 century, the Portuguese sea traders and pirates on
their trade expedition found their way to the West Africa coast. Their
relationship with Nigeria was COrdial as they opened a seaport in Gwarto in
the ancient Benin kingdom. The cordiality developedof the extent that the
Oba of Benin in 14th century sent an ambassador to Portugal and Portugal in
response sent some agent to Benin (Crowther 1962). To communicate effectively, for
the purpose of trade, Nigerians had to learn Portugal. Hence, Christopher (1953) says
that during this period many of the Negroes learnt Portuguese... the so called Negro
Portuguese, which was a kind of pidgin Portuguese. Crowther (1962) also
affirms that a section of the Benin royal palace spoke a language quite unintelligible to the ordinary
Benin and this language was suspected to be Portuguese. Even in present day pidgin in
English usage in Nigeria, we still have a handful of Portuguese vocabulary items like
Pikin "Child" boku "many" etc.

The monopoly of Portugal of West African coast was later challenged by other
European countries like Britain which language is English language. Later the
trading focus shifted from legal trading on gold, ivory, pepper and malamute to
illegal trading in human beings called "slave trade" from 1450 - 1850. This trade
brought the culture of the two parties together. Within this period, some Nigerians
have started learning English and some were trained interpreters and to serve as core
clerks in European companies in Nigeria. English language got hold in Nigeria
through the activities of Nigerians who were taken away for slavery and had returned to
Nigeria and those who were at home but learnt to speak English, so they could work as
clerks and interpreters for the Europeans.

English in Nigeria During Colonialism

The missionary activities led to the abolition of slave trade in West African
regions. With the abolition of this illegal trading, many Nigerians taken away on slavery
returned to Nigeria and other West African sub-regions. Awonusi (2004) reports that
some of these Nigerians particularly the Yorubas locally known as 'Akus' in Sierra
Leone, returned and settled in Lagos and Abeokuta where they were known as Saros
and Krios and they freely used the English language in their settlements.
The year 1843 - 1914 witnessed serious missionary activities and the influx of European missionaries into Nigeria to take the gospel to the pagans and the unbelievers. The missionaries in their efforts to reach out to the people had to use Nigerian interpreters, taught the people how to read the Bible, which was written in English, established schools where children were trained and the basic subject was English language. Adetugbo (1979) says that, the English language dominated the curriculum under various sub heads such as reading, writing, dictation, composition and grammar.

**English after Amalgamation of Protectorates**

The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Nigeria in 1914 marks the beginning of the colonial interest in Standard Education in Nigeria. Before this time, there was a draw back in the educational system. Books were published in vernacular and indigenous languages were also taught in schools.

The 1945 constitution recommended English as in the West and East, and Hausa in the North as the official languages. Two model schools were founded within this period. That is the Barewa College in the North and Kings College in Lagos where English was made the language of instruction and interaction. It was used to determine the suitability of candidates in civil service employment and promotion as well as a condition for gaining admission into higher education. It was allocated roles in the legislature: as the language of the national assembly and the regional legislature. As a result of this, English was made compulsory in gaining admission into these schools which still continues today.

The widespread of the use of English later had effect on the British government as Nigerians became familiar with Western ideas, culture, values and ideals like democracy, freedom, enlightenment, fundamental human right, self determination and independence. The aftermath of it was the creation of political parties and the insistent demand for self government. Therefore on October 1960 Nigeria gained her independence from British.

At this phase, the English language and the indigenous Nigerian languages intertwined the more and a locally based English identity emerged and then entered a long blended process of 'Nativization' or 'Nigerianization' or what Adegbija (2004) calls 'Domestication' of English language in Nigeria where people started expressing English language naturally in a way that reflects their socio-cultural norms without unnecessarily sounding bookish. For instance, we see a situation where the term 'go slow' is used to replace 'traffic hold up' or 'drop' used to replace 'alight'. These are all elements of localization or what Ekpe (2005) calls 'globalization' (adaptation of a global outlook to local condition). The process of nativization of English in Nigeria did not stop when Nigeria became independent, it continues and an ongoing dynamism, renovative and creative processes in the English language in Nigeria to suit local context and world view.
The Role of English Language in Nigeria

English language has been nativized or domesticated to suit our socio-cultural context and is made to perform several functions such as:

The Language of Education

English language has been widely used in the propagation of education in Nigeria and this is used in all facets of education. It seems to be the most important function of English in our society. In all the levels of education in Nigeria, the English language is the most widely used language of instruction in schools. This has been given backing by the Nigerian Education Policy (1977) which makes it mandatory for the English language to be the only language of instruction in our schools especially at the secondary and the tertiary levels. The indigenous languages are often used mostly at the primary level of education, though rarely as every school considers the English language as the only suitable language of teaching and learning.

Apart from English being the language of educational instruction in Nigerian schools, it is also the language of educational evaluation in our schools. It is applicable at all levels of educational institution in Nigeria.

Language of the Government

Population. Debates in the States and the National Assemblies are conducted in English language. The English language is the language of government in Nigeria because almost all the transactions in government offices are carried out in the English language. Minutes, official correspondence, memoranda, circulars, instructions and directives are given out in the English language. Proceedings of meetings are written and conducted in English in government offices. Most government protocol and propaganda are carried out in English.

English language has dominated the political arena in Nigeria as the language of political campaigns and propaganda. This is so because Nigeria society is linguistically diverse and for a politician to communicate adequately with a diverse population with different shades of language, English is the only language because it is the language that can be understood by a larger in English language.

The Language of Commerce and Industry

Transactions in commerce and industry are mostly carried out in the English language and Pidgin English as well as in some local languages. English is the only language used in the board rooms during meetings by members of staff. Inter and intra business transactions are done with English language. Transactions in the banking halls are carried out in English. Trading in the stock exchange market is also performed in the English language. Although in small settlements like towns and villages where settlers are likely to be from the same ethnic group and language, business transactions would likely be carried out in the local languages and pidgin or broken English.
The Language of International Communication

When Nigerians want to engage in international business or transaction of any kind with persons beyond Nigerian geographical boundary, English becomes a readily available language to be used either in the country or outside the country. Announcements at airports are done in English because foreigners are likely to be among the passengers. It is only in few instances that indigenous languages like Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba and at times in Pidgin English are used in passing information across.

The Language of the Media

The English language is the most extensively used language in the Nigerian media. When we refer to the Nigerian media, we mean both the print and the electronic media. Although, there are some papers published in the indigenous languages, majority of the daily newspapers (like The Guardian, the Times, The Vanguard, The Punch, The Sun, The Independent) etc. are published in English. The weekly magazines like, This Week. Magazine, the Newswatch Magazine also does their publications in English. The electronic media which comprises the private, the state and the federal owned television and radio stations broadcast most of their news in English. While English dominates news casting in the private and the federal broadcasting stations, some state owned stations have been trying to promote the use of their local languages and the use of Pidgin English as well.

The Language of Law and Legal Drafting

Almost all the books in law and legal drafting are written in English. All volumes of the Nigerian constitution from inception till date are written in English. The 1979 constitution is written in English. All the law books used in all courts in Nigeria like the supreme Court, the court of Appeal, the High courts, the Magistrate courts and their proceedings are conducted in English and sparsely mixed with Latin and Greek languages. Although in some customary courts, their proceedings are conducted in both English and local languages. such as the Sharia court done in both Hausa and Arabic languages, there is no statute or law of the government establishments, corporations or institutions that is written in any of the an languages for now. Even the proceedings and teachings in our legal education are done strictly in r-Lish language. In our courts oaths are sworn to in English language as well as affidavit in support of claims and lost documents.

The Language of Science and Technology

Just like in any other areas, the language of science and technology in Nigeria is English. In information and technology, the language used is equally English, since science and technology have their bases in foreign countries; their terminologies have to be transferred to us in the language of the country of origin which is obviously English.
The Language of Social Interactions

In most social gatherings in Nigeria, English is used as a means of social interactions. For instance, in traditional marriage, naming ceremony, house opening ceremony, parties and child dedication, the language mostly used is English and at times, code-switch or code-mixed with the indigenous languages.

The English Language as a Global Language

English language in Nigeria was imported from Britain and adequately modified from time to time through the process of adaptation since its incursion in Nigeria environment. Its dominance in government circle in the colonial times and particularly in the 1950s to the present is an uncontroversial fact. In fact, its dominance in recent times has reached an unbearable peak with the increasing impact of globalization in world economy and technology. In terms of English language aggressive expansion and spread, recently the British council in its English 2000 project made some interesting and impressive statement about the extent in which the English language is used in the world today. It says it is used in over 70 countries as an official or semi-official language and it has important status in over 20 countries and of course Nigeria is not left out. It is evident that one out of five of the world population speak English to some level of competence and the demand for the other four fifths is increasing on a daily basis as it is the language of books, newspapers, airports and air traffic control, international competitions, pop music and advertising. It is true that over two third of the world's scientist read in English. Third quarter of the world's mail is written in English; while 80% of the world's electronically stored information is done in English. Of the estimated 40 million users of the internet, the majority of its users communicate in English (Arsoba, 2000).

Nigeria as a country has its own variety of English which differs from that of other countries. On investigation of the English language in Nigeria thus far, there is no doubt that there is Nigerian English. Bamgbose (1982) says that, the debate over whether Nigerian English exists has now become a non-issue as features of instances of its spoken and written forms have been described and the descriptions published in outlets within and outside its territory. Ekpe (2007) writes extensively on the emerging evolutionary of world Englishes and the varieties that have developed especially in Nigerian English, which he says English as a global language has developed many varieties (ranging from standard, non-standard, dialect, national, regional, Creole, hybrid, pidgin, rotten or broken ), resulting in different classifications as "World Englishes or New Englishes. A look at various classifications polarized Nigerian English into standard and non-standard varieties.
The non-standard Nigerian English is the English speech form used in Nigeria that does not conform to the set-down of rules of the English language. This variety of English may be accepted and intelligible locally but it lacks international acceptability and intelligibility. The standard Nigerian English (SNE) is the variety of English used by Nigerians to communicate across socio-cultural boundaries. The school English (SE) is what is today referred to as the standard Nigerian English. Bamgbose says the school English, with its heavy dose of Christian religious literature, is the variety that the present Nigerian English emanates from. The notion 'standard English ' is direct and deliberate attempt by the society to create a body of rule or yard stick by which grammaticality of English could be measured. Although there are people who are products of traditions of classical grammars and of English syllabuses of the Victorian era, they either doubt the existence of Nigerian English or simply remain contemptuous of its form. For instance Bamgbose (1982) reports the published view of a Nigerian linguist and professor of English language education who did not believe in the existence of Nigerian English in spite of his 50 years of learning, teaching and examining the language, a contrary view, legitimate even if not valid. The number of those who was skeptic about the existence of Nigerian English started reducing drastically since the publication of the griev report in 1966 and the institutionalization and implementation of its recommendations in school certificates English examinations and other public measurements of competence in the language, including the use of English in creative writing. This skepticism was due to the myriad of varieties or regional dialects of English that cropped up. Now that a standard has been created and a particular variety selected for use in international and intra-national communication, this variety has been allocated status and function as internationally intelligible variety (the standard Nigerian English) from 1960 onward, "standard Nigerian English" has been marked by the features and characteristics typical of endonormative stabilization, (Ekpe 2007). This variety has been allocated lots of functions as it is used in a wide range of communicative situations such as administration, politics, media, education and academia, trade and commerce, book publication and film industry.

It is used by Nigerian creative writers to express their world view and as communicative vehicle. This can be seen in the creative works of esteemed and award winning writers like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Adichie and others.

The standard Nigerian English comes out of the local form of English (non-standard). The Nigerian English is an evidence that English in Nigeria is now widely seen as an indigenous language with acceptable local features, which is modified to suit our daily need of usage. This variety being an emerging acceptable local variety of English has passed through a lot of linguistic filters as many scholars one of such like Adegbija (2004) has made conscientious efforts in describing it. This has exerted much influence on this variety of Nigerian English and has enhanced its status in its different ramifications of usage. The standard Nigerian English has gone through the criteria for standard language which are selection, codification, elaboration of function, acceptance and intelligibility. In the identification of standard Nigerian English, scholars have
identified varieties noticeable among Nigerians on the criteria of local acceptability and international intelligibility.

The English language has come to stay as an unrivalled language of communication in Nigeria and will remain so for a very long time till the government is ready to be serious with its national language policy which is not foreseeable in the nearest future. Since we have come to the reality with the existence and the status of Nigerian English, Awonusi (2007) opined that in order to crawl out of the quagmire of the use of non standard terms that impede spoken and written communication in English in Nigeria, teachers, researchers and the government must brace up for new challenges.

Problems Associated With the English Language in Nigeria
This paper will concentrate on the problems associated with the linguistic aspect.

English and Linguistic Problems in Nigeria.
Some of the problems that have to do with the linguistic aspect are:

**Multilingualism**

One problem associated with English is that it has succeeded in creating a legion of multilingualism. In other words, people in a speech community speak more than two languages. That is, as a typical Nigerian one is expected to speak his mother tongue, one of the officially approved major languages plus English. Nigeria therefore produce an interesting linguistic situation that attract attention, not only in terms of the actualization of the ethnicity based aspiration within the context of the genuine development of the country as a whole (Iwara 2008).

**English as the First Language of Some Nigerians**

Most Nigerians speak English Language as their first language mostly in homes of professional and middle class parents. This is also obtainable in homes where couples engage in inter-ethnic marriages. In these homes children speak English as their first languages and thereafter if at all desired, learn their parent's mother tongues. We find out most times, it dominates and children from such homes may never learn how to speak their mother tongues. Hence Udofot (2007) affirms that in such homes where children are made to acquire both English and the mother tongues simultaneously, English soon gains dominance over the other languages.

**Emergence of Pidgin English**

The English language has led to the emergence of a simplified form of English called pidgin English is mostly used by the not so-educated class to interact with other people, mostly in a multilingual environment like Nigeria. This class of people is not competent enough in the use of Standard English as such; they have to simplify the complex structure of English so that they can interact in English. However, this form of English has gained wider currency that even the highly educated people equally use it as well mostly in informal context. This variety of English has permeated the media both electronic and the print. It is also widely
used in advertisements. This has really had effect on the younger generation. Children in schools can no longer express themselves clearly in English without shipping in one or two of this brand of English. Also, in written forms, we are aware that this variety of English is not acceptable in our educational systems.

**Emergence of Creole**

In some regions in Nigeria, the Pidgin English has been so deep rooted to the extent that some people can no longer speak their indigenous languages. These people now pass on the variety of English to their children in that the new or present generations of children have no contact at all with what was their parents' mother tongue. This new variety of Pidgin has developed and attained some level of sophistication. This process is noticeable in some places in Nigeria in which English based pidgin has developed over the years and gradually became creolized in some parts of the country like Edo, Delta and Rivers states. These states in Nigeria have native speakers of Pidgin as their mother tongue. This again could have adverse effect on the growing children as our educational system does not accept it.

**The Emanation of Code Variation**

The emanation of code variation is as a result of the linguistic problems of English language in Nigeria. Code variation refers to instances that Nigerian speakers of English as a second language code-switch or code-mix at intervals when engaged in discourse. We find out that a multilingual uses two codes in communication that is, he uses the two languages interchangeably and at times moving from one language to another and yet at others substituting words in one language for another in the same stretch of speech.

**Absence of Specialized Resource Centre**

It is sad and ironical that English with its myriad of functions and its enviable attainment in Nigeria society does not have a national English Centre while other exoglossic languages like French and Arabic have such centres or language villages'. Mathematics also has a National Mathematics Centre after recording a high failure rate of students in the GCE and JAMB results. The local languages are not left out; they have the National Institute of Nigerian indigenous languages, which are meant to promote the growth, use and the documentation of indigenous languages. English which remains our national language deserves one of such centres if we are to compete favourably in the linguistic market place with our variety of English.

**Conclusion**

English language has come to stay and compete favourably well with other languages in Nigeria. In a multilingual environment, it is the usefulness of a language that determines the importance of the language in the midst of other competing languages in the linguistic market place. English language has been adopted as a national language in Nigeria because
it is the only language commonly used by everybody as a medium of communication. It is a language that has unified people of diverse cultures and languages. It is the language of politics, government, commerce, education, instruction in schools, mass media and law. It is the language of international and intra-national interaction. It is the language of inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic communication in Nigeria. The importance of the English language in Nigeria cannot be compared with that of any other language because of the numerous roles it plays in our society and it will remain so for a long time until another language will be developed enough to challenge it.

**Recommendations**

From the forgoing, the following recommendations are made:

1. Emphasis should be placed on the mother tongue as a first language. People should be made to be aware of the need to learn to speak the mother tongue and not to take English as the mother tongue.
2. English language should be taught and emphasized as a second language.
3. The use of Pidgin English at home, school, media (whether electronic or print) should be discouraged. This is because it is an impediment to the learning of the standard form of English.
4. Reading culture especially among youths which is dying now should be revived through formation of reading clubs such as debating and literary societies and well equipped libraries.
5. The use of corrupted English in the entertainment industry by comedians should be discouraged because they are usually imitated as they form bad role models.
6. The federal government as a matter of urgency should establish a National English Language Centre like the French, Arabic, and Mathematics centres so as to promote its usage.

**References**


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