

# THE UNIFYING FORCE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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## **Abstract**

*This paper addresses the vexed issue of language question in Nigeria by exploring the unifying significance of the English language. It foregrounds that though the continuous use of English as the nation's lingua franca is tantamount to perpetuating colonialism/imperialism, yet there is no alternative indigenous language that can assume the role of English. It is maintained that, given the prevalent and ever-increasing mutual suspicion of, and linguistic rivalry among, the various Nigerian ethno-linguistic groups, English will continue to be vibrant. The paper submits that English appears to have been surreptitiously attached to the destiny of Nigeria, and any attempt to alter the status quo, as it is, in favour of one of the Nigerian languages, will lead to a chain of socio-political crises that will assuredly threaten the corporate existence of Nigeria.*

One of the dominant and pervasive problems in Nigeria, and in Africa at large, is the language question. Language, being a potent vehicle of transmitting cultures, values, norms and beliefs from generation to generation, remains a central factor in determining the status or nature of any nation.

In Nigeria, where like many other African nations, multilingualism is a rule, rather than an exemption, the problem of 'forging ahead' is of crucial import. Among the competing language that scrambles for national recognition or official status, whether indigenous or foreign, one must emerge as the official language (the language of administration and education at some levels), the language of relevance, from the competitors for the purpose of uniting the nation. Fortunately or unfortunately, English has emerged as that privileged language without which the unity of Nigeria as a nation is mostly improbable, if not outrightly impossible.

### **The English Language in the Multilingual Nigerian Context**

Multilingualism is a sociolinguistic phenomenon that arises as a result of language contact. It is situations in which two (i.e. bilingualism, specifically) or more languages operate within the same context. Factors such as political annexation, martial relation, economic transaction, cultural association, educational acquisition and religious affiliation bring about multilingualism. All these factors underpin the social-political landscape of Nigeria today even though the combination of political annexation and economic transaction or exploitation originally brought the people referred to as Nigerian today in contact with the English people. The advent of the English colonialists in the 18<sup>th</sup> century brought about ‘linguistic imperialism’ a situation by which, according to Asne (1979) as cited in Fanilola (1988:89).

When Nigeria attained her political independence, ‘linguistic imperialism’ had to be sustained in the interest of the nation. This is because there was no indigenous language that could perform the function of English because of the mutual suspicion of, and ethnic consciousness among, virtually all Nigerians. Multilingualism which should be viewed as an asset, an embodiment of the cultural diversity and linguistic enrichment of the country, became a liability and the popular attitude to it is that associated with ‘the curse of Bebel’.

In Nigeria, there is simply no politically neutral language. In fact, the division into three major regions reflects the three language poles: Hausa, Yoruba, and Ibo. The political survival of Nigeria as a country would even be more seriously threatened than it is any of these languages were promoted by the Government as being the one national language.

### **The Unifying Roles of English In Nigeria**

English is the language of integration in Nigeria as our previous discussion shows. Amidst the compounding complexities of Nigeria especially in relation to the language question, the only language that indexes the spirit of togetherness is English. More often than not, activities conducted in indigenous language are reprobated as being ethnic or tribal, except in cultural celebrations or entertainment displays. This explains why even during the first republic and even the colonial era, when English had no attained its present level of ascendancy in national and international affairs, political parties were formed in English.

This integrative role is not limited to parties or political parties alone but virtually all strata of Nigerian life. In sports, the function of English as its language

gives room for integration as it remains the only area where the syndrome of ethnicity/tribalism has not permeated. Most Nigerians do not care of an ethnic group, as long as they can deliver the goods: goals, goals. The use of English facilitates the absence of ethnic sentiments in this regard.

English is also acceptable to all – even to those who clamor against its irresistible dominance. It is the language that is not fraught with suspicions in any formal of literate context. During the military regime of General Abacha for instance, there was an allegation or insinuation that the apex ruling council General Diya did not speak, at a time that the relationship between them became frosty. It is the only language that does not generate suspicions of having a skeleton in one’s cupboard or a ‘hidden agenda’ in inter-ethnic relationship or transactions.

### **English Versus Indigenous Languages: Towards A United Nigeria**

There have been arguments and counter-arguments for and against the issue of English language as the official language/language of education in a situation like this; it is obvious that English become increasingly important. The volatile Nigerian socio-political domain requires English now, more than before, to avoid disintegration and threat to its corporate existence. Though, one is uncomfortable with the negative sides of English as it ‘masterminds’ the relegation of the Nigerian languages to the extent that we do have a real language policy, instantiates the systematic loss of Nigerian cultural identity among the younger generation and ensures the consolidation of colonial legacy, yet there is no any other language that can keep Nigeria one apart from English. The ‘war against English’ in some quarters in thus a lost battle. English has already been natives and the challenge now is the standardization of Nigerian English – simply the variety of English that is marked by local aura at all levels of linguistic analysis: phonology, morphology, Syntax, lexico-semantics and pragmatics. Efforts should be geared towards developing and promoting Nigerian languages as national heritage, it is agreed, but English should not be de-emphasized at all for Nigerians to be able to function well, acceptably and intelligibly, in the fast constricting modern world and in fact, to survive as a nation. The utilities of English need not be undermined for the purpose of promoting Nigerian languages.

Although a united Nigeria rests on English, yet her survival as a nation is beyond English. Nigeria is just a ‘nation on paper’ as Professor Wole Soyinka is wont to say because of her inherent contradictions – ours is:

## **Conclusion**

Like all multilingual nations, Nigeria is faced with the language question. An artificial contraption of heterogeneous ethnic communities and linguistic groups forcefully determined by the colonial interlopers, for selfish political and economic reasons, Nigeria has to survive despite the “mistakes” of her assemblage on a common linguistic group. Based on the well Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (i.e. the principles of linguistic determinism (language determines the way we think) and linguistic relatively (the distinctions encoded in one language are not found in any other language), one would have expected that one of our indigenous languages assumes the official status or the language of education because “the child learns better in his mother tongue and that his mother tongue is as natural to him his mother’s milk” (Fafunwa, 1983:395) and “more developed communities use their own languages in education and technical training (Asne, cited in Fanilola, 1988:84). But the reverse is the case in Nigeria, like many other African nations, as the colonial language of English still remains dominant as the language of virtually all aspects of national life: politics, administration, business, sports, diplomacy, communication, media, education, creativity, literacy, constitution, law, just to mention a few.

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