

THE PLACE OF FRENCH LANGUAGE IN A MULTILINGUAL NIGERIA

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Abstract

French language is generally regarded as one of the European Languages. European languages are the languages of European countries such as English Language spoken by the English people, French language spoken by the French, the Belgian and the Swiss, Spanish language spoken by the people of Spain, German language spoken by the people of Germany, for example. These languages have spread across the globe especially during the time of the slave trade and colonization and recently as a result of globalization and improved communication technology. In contemporary, Nigeria, English language, the language of the colonial masters is the official language and a few years ago, late Flead of State, General Sani Abacha, decreed French language as the second official language of Nigeria. These notwithstanding, it is also a known fact that Nigeria has about 400 indigenous languages, which are often spread in a non-linguistic sense into “major” and “minor” languages. In this expose, the writer hopes to examine critically the situation of French, one of the European languages vis-a-vis the Nigerian reality where each language group is yearning for the recognition of its own language. Is French really a second national language in status and in practice? Should the language be enhanced in status or should less emphasis be placed on it to the advantage of the many Nigerian languages? These and the few other questions we shall try to propose answers.

Introduction

Language is the superior form of human expression of the peoples of the world. This is why we talk of European languages, Asiatic languages, Chinese language, Arabic language, African languages and Nigerian languages, for example. All these languages are equivalent instruments of communication, which represent in diverse ways, the experiences, aspirations, achievements, technologies and progress of man.

French Language is the second rated international language after English in terms of the number of persons that speak it. About a decade ago, late General Sanni Abacha decreed French language as the second national language in Nigeria. Hitherto, French has been taught mainly in secondary schools (private and public), Colleges and Universities.

It is also a known fact that many universities colleges and institutes have embarked on the massive development of the “major” Nigerian languages in the milieu in which they are sited. Today a lot of literature abounds in Nigerian languages. We also have religious documents and several states of the Federation are already agitating for deliberations in their Houses of Assembly in “local languages” while there are moves now to translate the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to the three “major languages”: Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo, with an aim to removing the “exclusion zone”.

In the light of the foregoing it has become exigent to examine the teaching of this “second official language” vis-a-vis the realities on ground. In doing this, the conference intends to examine: the French people and the language, the gains of French, Nigerian languages and the problem of teaching and the issue of a national language.

In conclusion, we shall enunciate the way forward.

The French People and Language

The French people can be described as a people of Germanic descent speaking a predominantly Roman language which also contains Germanic and Gallic elements. French language as it is today, can be seen as Latin transformed by centuries of usage in the French soil. It has been

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described as a language “unsurpassed for beauty of enunciation, clearness of expression, melody, rhythm and precision.”

The French have a unique way of thinking and one can easily experience this in their language, imagery and structures. This is why the French lay claim to have a Cartesian mentality. This quality can easily be dictated by any scholar of French who takes a study of their 17th Century authors.

By dint of history, the language has grown and spread in time and space from its home to the entire globe, spreading to Belgium, Switzerland, Canada, New Brunswick France later founded some colonies in the West Indies and brought some slaves to Africa to help in their exploitation. Thus French was introduced in Haiti, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyana and many other Caribbean Islands. The advent of colonization in the 19th century brought the Western European countries including France into Africa. By this, French language came to be spoken in many African regions like Senegal, Guinea, Mali, Burkina-Fasso, Central African Republic, Gabon, Congo, Zaire, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Cameroon, Niger, Tchad, Togo, Benin Republic and Ivory Coast. Many Nigerians know and ought to know that we are surrounded by many French speaking countries. So Abacha rightly discovered that we need French after English, for our survival in a modern state in a changing Africa and by extension, in a global village.' The francophone African countries have by virtue of the French policy of assimilation imbibed a great deal of French taste without losing their African cultural heritage. Much of this can be seen in their literature. Consequently French and African elements dominate the African Francophone African literature. This constitutes a “treasure island” which only the privileged in French language can explore.

The Gains of French Language

It will be a Herculean task to document in these few pages of ours, the entirety of the gains of French language. What we intend to do here is to highlight the gains of French in African literature which is our domain because we feel that literature can help to foster the much needed “unity in diversity” in the Nigerian nation.

For any student who has been well grounded in French, the famous fabulist Jean de La Fontaine must be a household name. La Fontaine wrote a total of 236 fables in 12 separate books. These stories are not only charming but are a compendium of lessons to be learnt by all who want to be wise. They remind us of our oral tradition which many Africanists and ethnographers are battling to keep alive.

In his prelude to the first book, Jean de La Fontaine explains that he was writing stories which contain truths that are lessons for all. According to him, “All things talk in my stones, even fishes. What they say apply to us all. I make use of animals to educate human beings” (Fontaine: 1965:57).

It is true that his stones were different in many ways from the African oral tradition but both have many useful resemblances. They easily remind the African of the stories of the Tortoise, the Spider, the Hare or the Hyena depending on his geographical region. No doubt the French writer would have spent a lot of time watching all kinds of creatures like birds, animals, insects and even trees. He then attributed to them, virtues and vices of humans, thereby making his fables authentic in nature by representing faithfully the human and animal world which form the synthesis of nature. Africans live very close to nature and can interpret its numerous “languages” and symbols.

No doubt, this wonderful initiation into the world of oral literature in French stimulated many Africans including Nigerians to the research into African orature both in French and in English. They came up with publications in defense of the orality of the African literature, thereby correcting many erroneous impressions and misconceptions about our literatures. A lot of experts like Lylian Kestelot and Robert Pageard were overemphasizing the written African Literature and ignoring the oral form, which many experts in oral literature agree is the mainstay of the black literary contribution to the world. Scholars like P.I. Okeh in his paper published in the *Canadian Journal of African* (OKEH: 1975) titled, “Les origines et le développement de la littérature Negro-Africaine” laid this issue to rest. Jiff Mokobia complemented this study in his Doctoral thesis titled “Influence de la littérature orale sur la littérature écrite à travers des œuvres de Chinua Achebe et Amadou Hampate Ba.” In all, evidence was overwhelming that oral literature is the rock on which African written literature stands. Today, one can easily lay his hands on Nigerian oral literary narratives written in French by writers like Uche Oquike, Françoise Balogun, Emmanuel Adeniyi, to mention just these.

The Place of French Language in a Multilingual Nigeria

The literary gains of French can also be found in what we might term “colonial literature”, that is black literature written by some authors who imitate European models, narrating events and ideas from colonization of Africa to the era of independence. These gains also extend to contemporary literature which recount the events of unpalatable happening under our independence. The most debilitating problems seem to have no solutions. The black continent since independence has remained the euphemistic “developing” countries. It is not the issue of slogans of political parties. African writers in French have made deliberate efforts to provoke genuine actions which will bring about true development in Africa nay Nigeria. Through such works like *Les Soleils des Independences* by Amadou Kouyouma, *les Cercles des Tropiques* by Anta Diop, *La Vie et Demic* by Sony Labou Tansi, *Allah n'est pas oblige...* by Ahmadou Kourouma, African writers in French bring to the fore, issues like poverty, perpetual under-development, flagrant deviations from justice and unimagined dictatorship. All these are meant to be lessons for us all to learn. In all, French language opens one's eyes to literary knowledge and a widened horizon in international communication. One cannot but mention the neighborhood factor of the influence of Francophone countries bordering Nigeria, and the dire need for West African integration, the research opportunities in West Africa, professionalism in West Africa, French language and International Organizations in West Africa, French language and Nigerian image making in West Africa, without forgetting the business opportunities for Nigerians and West Africa.

Nigerian Languages

Experts have put Nigerian languages to about 400. Some have been christened “major” and others “minor,” but without linguistic consideration. The so called major Nigerian languages include Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo languages while the west like Bini, Efik, Ijaw, Urhobo, Fulfude, Angas, etc remain unlinguistically minor.

Problem Facing the Development of Nigerian Languages

Not oblivious of the importance of indigenous language, the Nigerian government came up with a policy on local language development. Section 5.1.5 of the 1988 Cultural Policy states inter alia:

“The state shall promote the mother tongue as the basis of cultural education and shall ensure the development of the Nigerian languages as vehicles of expressing modern ideas and thought process.”

It further goes on to say in 9.2.1: and 9.2.2. that

“The state shall recognize language as an important aspect of the educational system. Nigerian languages shall thus serve as media of instruction in all subjects in the early years of primary education.”

No doubt, these are laudable objectives but to what extent have these objectives been realized remains an enigma. One can give kudos to a large extent to the development of the so-called major languages of Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo where we can talk of experts in the languages but can one say so of other 397 Nigerian languages?. So many Institutes and departments of linguistics and African / Nigerian languages abound in our universities. Nigerians are yet to feel the impact of these departments and Institutes.

One cannot but bemoan the situation in most of these departments. Most of the indigenous language teachers are not specifically trained to teach these languages. They are either co-opted by one interest group or the other or they sacrifice their original areas of research to delve into these languages. What prevails in most of the circumstances is transfer of learning skills in the teaching of indigenous languages. Many of such teachers are those who can speak the language in question without any “proper” training in the art of the language. This view was enunciated by Emenanjo (1990):

“We will find, if we care to ask that, the first and second generation linguists and literary scholars and even writers in many Nigerian languages were people who had no formal training or certificates in the Nigerian languages they had to teach.”

Obviously, this is not so in the teaching of European language like French in Nigeria, where for instance, the minimum requirement for a teacher of French in Nigerian university is M.A.

Another problem facing the development of Nigerian languages is that of standardization. Even among the so called major languages, there is still the issue of standard language and that of dialects. There is still much polemic today on which is the standard Igbo, for example.

Related to the issue of standardization, is the problem of orthography. Many Nigerian languages have not been codified and even those codified lack standardization. The result of this is "existence of varieties of orthographies.

This ultimately leads to the logical phase of non availability of standard pronunciation: "reived pronunciation" or "central pronunciation".

All these technical problems relative to standardization bring to the fore the following urgent needs:

1 Systematic description of all the speakers in a geographical region, and their comparison in order to arrive at an operational identification of languages and their dialects;

2 Socio-linguistic research in order to identify in what direction to look for the basic standard. But how many of these languages in Nigeria, considering our geopolitics, emotions and sentiments can be developed as Nigerian languages?

National Language

The need for a National language in Nigeria is long overdue. What one means here is the language of central administration, government instruction and National Assembly. Recently, there is the move in the National Assembly to translate the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to the 3 major languages of Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, the proponents of such a move have become oblivious of the fact that there are hundreds of other tribes and language users in the Assembly. They also forget that these languages are also representatives of various "nationalities", as one commonly has today.

The Way Forward

Having tried to examine objectively the status quo of French language and Nigerian language, we shall now attempt to proffer solutions to the numerous problems highlighted:

It is unequivocally true that the teaching of French in Nigeria has come to stay. It is a welcome idea that it should not only be regarded as a second official language in principle but all efforts should be doubled by all concerned to enhance the teaching/learning process of the language. Its curriculum should be further enhanced, especially in our higher institutions, to include the modern gains in technology and global communications;

Nigeria needs now more than ever before, a National language. If language is a vehicle of culture and culture the hallmark of unity, then Nigeria must now begin to see herself as one "scattered like the fingers but united like the fist". It is our firm belief that only Truly *National* languages will do the magic. It was this quest for unity that led Nigerians to the development of *wa-zo-bia*, derived from the word for "come" from Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo. Linguists must tell us the validity and possibilities of such artificially created languages. Of course WAZOBIA failed and any attempt to create another artificiality will fail again and again. We therefore make bold to suggest what Simire (2003) calls "*L' Intercultural*" and the only one that is very likely to stand the test of time in Nigeria is the *Pidgin*. As Vincent (1986:35) puts it,

"One interesting feature of the Africanness of the language of modern African literature is the use of creolized or pidginized forms which... clearly have English connections but which have grown to have distinct characteristics... and offer means of communication which cuts across ethnic, tribal... and class barriers..."

just as French language of today evolved from Latin and Germanic languages, so too can PIDGIN be adopted as a truly National language.

French language and the proposed Nigerian language should coexist because of the exigencies of time.

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