

**PROFILING THE POLITICS AND PROSECUTION OF THE NIGERIAN
LANGUAGE POLICY: A WORD FOR A NATION IN SEARCH OF AN IDENTITY.**

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and very complex amalgamation of differing interests, and the fortuitous amalgamation of these sometimes contrasting groups by the colonial government in 1914 gave rise to issues of sectional nationalism and multi-lingualism which successive governments have tried unsuccessfully to address. This has proved, over the years, to be a proverbial albatross bedevilling national development.

The National Language Policy in the National Policy on Education and the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria are two documents that seem to address these problems, although several years of seeming implementation have not resulted in much difference in people's attitudes. This paper is an attempt to X-ray the Nigerian National Language Policy, highlighting the political and operational challenges that have made its implementation at much variance with what the stated intentions are. It offers suggestions on steps that should be taken by various stakeholders to remediate the situation and thereby redirect public interest towards awareness and acceptance of the Nigerian Project through the medium of language.

Key Words: Nigerian National Language Policy, Implementation, Integration, Mobilisation.

INTRODUCTION

Language in most human communities, whether homogeneous or heterogeneous, is constantly in a state of flux. New knowledges, new experiences and inter-migration perpetually colour the face of man's expression of the world around him such that the same language can metamorphose so drastically that special study might be required by a contemporary user to decipher utterances made in an earlier version of the same language: Medieval English forms (lexical, semantic and structural) and earlier forms of Yoruba language (spellings) are ready instances to cite.

In homogeneous communities, linguistic forms are largely uniform in structure and meaning, except for inevitable but inconsequential nuances in pronunciation due to dialectal and individual idiosyncracies, and these are usually not significant enough to impede mutual intelligibility. Most homogeneous societies (e.g. Britain, France, Germany,) are united in cultural practices, religion, beliefs, socio-political experiences and other factors that constitute language. The businesses of governance, education, commerce, politics and interpersonal communication exchanges of all types are therefore activities whose implementation and monitoring are largely routine. In many heterogeneous societies however, Nigeria inclusive, clearly spelt out policies and guidelines for the deployment of language in formal public and corporate engagements are strategic tools for national peace and development.

Policies are programmes of actions, roadmaps and implementation strategies deriving from an analysis of the strengths, perceived weaknesses, windows of opportunities and potential threats to effective national development. Again, identifying and tackling such issues are relatively straightforward in mono-cultural nations, but multi-ethnic, culturally and linguistically diverse nations like Nigeria must evolve policies which could guide collective aspirations and enhance nationhood through language. Such aspirations could include national integration and cohesion by ensuring that government business is done in a language embraced by the larger proportion of the citizenry in a multilingual setting. Concomitant rules could stipulate language competence requirements for participation in specific public activities. Educational policies could also specify language requirements for inclusion in the training of a generation of leaders for the nation. The spheres of intranational and

international relations in trade, diplomacy, security, etc are also controlled in the adoption of certain languages as vehicles of formal communication. A language policy therefore should be seen as a tool by which various desires and aspirations of government are implemented directly or indirectly, and which impinges upon several aspects of national life.

Problem Statement

Issues generated by the formulation and subsequent implementation (or non-implementation) of a national language policy in Nigeria have been in the domain of scholarly discourse over the years, but not much of positive reaction has been observed in both content and delivery of basic education in Nigeria since then. Meanwhile, native Nigerian languages continue to slide rapidly down the slope into impending fatality. Timely warnings about local language endangerment appear largely rebuffed by successive governments and a growing youth population that naively prides itself in an arguable mastery of English as a medium of formal and informal interaction to the detriment of their intrinsic symbol of identity; their native languages! Even parents and teachers seemingly connive in this unpatriotic *coup d'état* that threatens to wipe out the last vestiges of our identity as a people.

This paper is therefore an attempt to re-open the debate, especially in this era of “change”, in the hope that somebody so appropriately placed may just listen and kick-start remediation.

The Nigerian National Language Policy

There is no single document created as Nigeria’s national language policy, yet one cannot discountenance various attempts to document government intention towards ensuring peace, national cohesion, educational, socio-political, economic and general development using language as a fulcrum. For instance, the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Section 5:1) provided for the use of English in doing the business of the National and State Legislatures. An additional window was also provided for using any of the 3 languages designated as “major” for reasons of demography (Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo). The motive here was to attain inclusiveness in representation and participation in legislative business. At the state level, the various Houses of Assembly were allowed to use the predominant local language as an alternative medium in doing legislative duties.

There is no gainsaying the critical position of language in the recording of a nation’s history, in education and knowledge sharing towards unravelling the mysteries of the past, present, and charting a way for the future. This perhaps underscores the prominence of language in the Nigerian National Policy on Education. Ofodu (2003:6) traced the history of the Nigerian educational system to reveal that traditional education, which pre-dates western education, and which largely emphasised “social responsibility, job orientation, political participation and moral and spiritual values”. Pedagogical activities which carried these intentions included practical farming, weaving and carving, and the medium of instruction was the indigenous languages. The guiding principle was, according to Osokoya (1999) and Amucheazi (2000), functionalism. Although the driving principle and activities appear widespread across the various indigenous communities (with little modifications), there is no

significant evidence of any policy document prescribing these models. One can then conclude that the philosophy and practice of traditional education were needs-driven and culturally adapted.

Western colonial administration necessitated the review and documentation of strategic educational and procedural steps to identify and address specific educational needs of the nation in an effort to improve governance and the quality of life. There was therefore a transition from the loosely regulated regime of educational activities of churches and religious organisations around the 1840s to the regime of Ordinances guiding formal educational practices. One of the earliest attempts to evolve precise policies guiding Nigerian education was premised on the Phelps Stokes Commission Report (1922) on 'Education in Africa' which recommended *inter alia* that natives (Nigerians) be formally taught in the indigenous languages so as to make education more relevant to local needs and enhance their appreciation of local values.

The build up to Nigerian independence and the subsequent attainment of proprietary control over administrative and educational policy matters by Nigerians led to the domestication of policies relevant to national development, hence the local formulation of a national education policy in 1977 (revised about three times since then) to meet Nigeria's developmental needs through education. The philosophy driving Nigeria's educational policy is the integration of every Nigerian into a nation of equal opportunities for all, and preservation of national cultural identity towards overall national development. The significance of language in attaining this vision was not lost on policy formulators, therefore a national language component was conspicuously enshrined in the policy;

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...

(NPE 2004 revised, Section 1:8)

In order to achieve the intention of the policy formulators, implementational steps were listed in the policy across the various tiers of formal education, the language component of which included:

PRIMARY LEVEL

- The medium of instruction in the initial years of primary schooling (Primaries 1-3) is the language of the immediate community, during which English shall be taught as a subject, and at a later stage (Primaries 4-6), English, during which the indigenous language shall be taught as a subject.
- Provision of appropriate instructional materials and libraries.
- Adequate number of teachers in schools (Ratio 1:30 at the primary level).

SECONDARY LEVEL

After the formative years of primary schooling, it was envisaged that the following prescriptions would further build on the gains at that level:

- The medium of instruction shall be English, while the language of the immediate environment shall be taught as a subject.
- A student shall study as core subjects, apart from English which is also the medium of instruction at this level, two Nigerian languages; his own native language and one of either of the major languages of Igbo, Yoruba or Hausa. At the senior secondary level, a student shall be expected to study English and one other Nigerian language as core subjects.
- French shall be a second national language in Nigeria.

TERTIARY LEVEL

Expectedly, tertiary education is given in English language, while any other language that is adjudged sufficiently codified could be studied at the tertiary level.

A Profile of the National Language Policy Implementation (The Principle)

In principle, successive governments in Nigeria have continued to echo a desire to push a reasonable level of development in the nation through the instrumentality of language. The policy itself, in the various documents in which they predominantly occur, appear quite adequate to midwife the egalitarian society of the nation's founding fathers' dream. Instructing primary school children in the language of their immediate environment, the medium through which they have just begun to formulate concepts, and by which they are beginning to understand the world around them (Chomsky: 1959), is a good way to appreciate and key into the adult world of identities and relationships. It is, in principle, a critical ingredient in inculcating positive patriotic attitudes in targeted generations of Nigerians, especially towards local languages, customs and practices. The current unsavoury tendency for Nigerians to down-rate indigenous languages (with concomitant over-valuing of English and other 'foreign' languages) in formal discourse could have been drastically reduced at least. This is much easy because at school, the child would most likely rely on familiar socio-linguistic environment and medium to carry out communication tasks. Individual and collective cognition would have become ingrained by the time the child becomes exposed to the infiltration of external language and cultural habits. Also in principle, the reinforcement potentials of an internalised First Language (L1) would have positively impacted upon a learned Second Language (L2) in the areas of pronunciation of similar phones, and the teacher would only need to work on areas of contrast in teaching pronunciation skills. A proper foundation in the indigenous language would also have provided the language and non-language teacher with a fall-back medium in explaining unfamiliar concepts in a new language.

As regards the English Language whose role in the nation's internal and external lives have been historically determined, the process of teaching/learning would have been conveniently calibrated for both teachers and learners. Children would have been gradually introduced to discrete object/concept recognition in the learned language, using the L1 for pedagogic support, and at the senior primary stage when the grammar and sociology of the L1 have become operationally internalised, the switch-over to English as a medium of instruction would have been easier to manage. Subsequent additional use of English as a medium of informal discourse among secondary school students who, unlike the tendency in the primary school, may be more diverse in ethnic spread, would have been much smoother to achieve.

A major area of concern in the prosecution of primary and secondary education is the dearth of instructional materials, including books, for teaching language and non-language subjects. English language even fares better as many more books are available locally and externally for formal and informal teaching and learning. Most Nigerian languages lack adequate textual materials for teaching and recreation in the languages. A policy which seeks to teach all subjects in the local languages provides a welcome challenge for writers and publishers to develop adequate texts for the subjects as may be required. Added to this is the potential of this to catalyse more rapid codification and inherent development of indigenous languages both in orthography and communicative efficiency. Perhaps this would also have improved

the acceptance rating of such languages. The reading culture of students could also have been better with the inculcation of effective reading habits in children right from the primary school level. Teacher improvement would also have been better guaranteed by a system that executes mandatory periodic in-service training for the implementers of the school curriculum.

At the relational level, the intention of inclusiveness and national integration which the nation continues to struggle to achieve would have been more easily attained with a generation of Nigerians who have grown up to understand and appreciate other languages and cultures from childhood. A compatriot you understand is easier to befriend than one who speaks in unfamiliar tongues! Agitations against marginalisation and exclusion from the scheme of things in the country, especially by citizens who feel that way due to the relatively sparse population of their ethnic groups, could at least have been minimised or reduced. Also, agitators for greater emphases to be placed on indigenous languages for the sentimental reason of our national pride and integrity as an autonomous nation would have been satiated by the policy, especially since it ostensibly departs from earlier policies/ordinances which had promoted English language to the detriment of the local languages (Adekola:2005:76). In fact, various scholars admit that the policy, based on the recognition of the capacity of indigenous languages to foster a united, strong and self-reliant nation, is appropriate for achieving political stability as well as economic development (Salami: 1999; Hymen: 1999).

Implementing the Nigerian National Language Policy (The Reality)

The ideals of the National Language Policy are indeed lofty, and a number of steps have been taken towards implementation. With the stipulation of Mother Tongue (MT) as the medium of instruction in primary schools, the attainment of basic literacy in the MT became an object of focus. Jowitt (2005: 10) records that the National Language Centre was merged with the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Centre to develop and encourage orthographies and teaching materials in various Nigerian languages. Also, a few states, especially in South West Nigeria, devoted a day in the legislative week for the use of Yoruba on the floor of the House. More Nigerian languages also began to feature in news and other mass media broadcasts, thereby enhancing the capacity of the language users to encode both formal and informal thought. Again, scholars within some major linguistic groups, e.g. *Egbé Onímò Yorùbá*, began moves to develop their metalanguages, thereby enhancing the capacity of the languages to convey precise meaning. Whether by design or happenstance, teachers at the basic level of education have enjoyed increased in-service training in various areas of content and pedagogy across the country courtesy of the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC). The process of continuous retraining of practitioners of basic education (teachers) and the supervising officers and inspectors from the State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs) is a necessary tonic to re-equip teachers and superintending officers on best practices in contemporary pedagogy.

All the measures stated above are requisite to the evolution of a generation of well-taught basic school graduates, so why then does the performance index in our schools keep falling?

Why are there not enough books in the various languages? The problem is largely implementational as we shall soon show:

Problems with Teaching/Learning Environment

The Language Acquisition Environment (LAE) is quite different from the Language Learning Environment (LLEA); the former is natural, unregulated and therefore the rate and depth of acquisition is largely sub-conscious, spontaneous, and determined by degree of immersion into the culture and practice of the language. The learned language on the other hand is artificial, deliberate, planned and graduated according to the rate and level of cognitive development of the learner. Many language learning theories abound on the most efficient ways to teach and learn language, but many are united in the position that the language learning process which immerses the learner into the L1 environment, or at least simulates the L1 situation is very crucial to language learning. The implementation of the language policy does not capture a contemporary Nigerian language environment where, even in an L1 environment, most learners are still enveloped in an L2 situation where a Yoruba child/learner for example is surrounded by non-Yoruba speaking peers, even in Yorubaland!

At the institutional level, a random observation of at least 50 schools in Oyo, Ogun and Lagos States (three Nigerian states where formal education is traditionally high) shows that most schools lack appropriate instructional materials to teach the MT. available materials like charts, models, flash cards, games and even texts are mostly written in English and not adapted to the local language teaching/learning environment. Not much visible effort is being made to encourage local and more domesticated teaching materials by government and other stakeholders.

Cultural, historical, ethnic and political divergence have also negatively affected the implementation of the policy. According to Adekola (78), opinion moulders in minority ethnic groups sometimes encourage their followers to distrust aspects of the policy which appear to favour major Nigerian languages, thereby inhibiting full implementation of the policy.

There appears to be a divergence between what the policy stipulates and what society, especially the educated elite wants; whereas the policy preaches promotion of local languages early in the child's life, society (both educated and illiterate) appears to crave a situation where their children go straight-for-English. This apparently largely informed the mushrooming of private Nursery /Primary schools which seemed to satisfy this craving of many parents, albeit haphazardly since mostly untrained and unqualified teachers were employed after the policy came out.

From oral interviews conducted, teachers are both unwilling and incapable to teach various subjects in the local languages yet, and do not feel pressed to acquire new and necessary competencies in such because parents are not much interested in their wards learning in the MT. teachers also feel too poorly motivated to embark on this extra trouble of re-training to acquire new skills. The few training programmes being conducted are merely seen as opportunities to recover a little bit of monies owed them by government.

Most Nigerian languages lack the robust metalanguage to address current academic and communication experiences, especially in a globalised, integrated world where Information Communication Technology (ICT) have removed international and cultural boundaries. There is as yet no concerted effort to reverse the situation. Also, the need for global competitiveness in technology, commerce, education, etc. have made the prospect of taking many steps backwards in time to develop local languages to meet contemporary challenges quite unattractive.

Problems of Supervision and Coordination.

Although the two main documents conveying government's intentions (The 1999 Nigerian Constitution and the National Policy on Education) highlighted government's policy direction, there was hardly any sensitisation drive to make the populace aware of the intention. In a nation where suspicion of ethnic domination is rife, such an omission easily gives rise to misunderstanding of government's intention and consequently, relative non-compliance. This is further fuelled by lack of monitoring of the implementation of the policy, making one to assume that government was never really committed to implementation, especially since the children of top government functionaries do not attend public schools mainly affected by the policy, and private schools appear to enjoy relative immunity from government scrutiny.

Inspectors and monitoring officers in State Basic Education Boards were not trained or mobilised to monitor or enforce proper implementation of the policy, and teachers and inspectors were not re-orientated towards the policy change implementation. The policy itself did not stipulate any penalty for non-compliance, and the verbiage of the document itself appears more like a statement of intentions than an enforceable document; hence government wanted done what teachers did not know how to do, parents did not want done, and policy-makers did not insist must be done.

Government did not set aside any special funds to train the teachers in the art of teaching in the MT, which is radically different from the art of teaching the MT. a Yoruba teacher for example still needs to be trained in how to teach Mathematics using Yoruba language. Training programmes should also have been organised for such purposes. Again, books and libraries that were promised in the NPE are still to be purchased or built many years after the programme was supposed to have taken off.

Language teaching/learning requires much of practical language drills which are best done in small, manageable groups, but a situation where an average class population per teacher far exceeds the recommended ratio (many classes were found to have more than 60 pupils to 1 teacher), not much of one-on-one supervision can be done by the teacher nor enough individual practical exercises given. Teachers are generally poorly motivated either intrinsically or extrinsically, hence do not provide the extra supervision and out-of-school incitement needed to assist language learners improve in language skills.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no gainsaying the fact that the Nigerian National Language Policy, as a corpus of stated intentions of government, is robust and ambitious in prospect, content and intent. It indeed has potentials to kick-start the nation's developmental potentials through inculcation of the right attitudes in Nigerians, especially the active youth population. However, available evidence so far indicate that there are severe procedural issues which may have truncated the lofty ideals even before implementation. Issues of integration of the diversity of interest groups within the country, infrastructure, mobilisation, motivation, supervision and review need to be urgently and persistently addressed if much effort is not to be wasted. To this end the following recommendations are suggested:

A conscious mindset should be adopted to integrate, as much as possible, the diverse entities which constitute the complex community called Nigeria, especially the many minority groups which collectively, form a sizeable percentage of the Nigerian nation. Cases of insurgency and volatility are often borne out of growing feelings of marginalisation and exclusion most often exhibited in linguistic acceptance or non-acceptance. To this end, the language policy needs to be periodically reviewed to assess the level of relevance and efficacy.

There is the need to reverse the trend of ignorance by government doubling back to begin a massive re-orientation and enlightenment of the citizenry on the need for executing the policy. Agencies like the National Orientation Agency (NOA) and the mass media are required to collaborate in this regard. The National Language Centre should also be charged, alongside with the National Educational Research and Development Centre, to come up with training manuals and instructional materials for the programme. This would be a template for prospective writers and publishers to develop on, thereby providing needed texts for implementing the programme.

Renewed implementation should begin with pilot schools drawn from the six geo-political zones. Appropriate motivation should be given to make the pilot programme work, like with Babs Fafunwa's Ife experiment, then when all loopholes have been plugged, this could be replicated nationwide. This would make the programme more enduring. Concerning the issue of French language, its inclusion in the list of national languages by the Abacha regime was more political than expedient. The decision needs to be properly reviewed to decide whether it is worthwhile at this time in the nation's history, especially considering the dominant role Nigeria is playing in the sub-region.

More schools should be provided and the existing ones expanded. Teachers should be trained gradually and continuously in the acquisition of pedagogic skills in the L1. Government should also invest massively in the project by supplying enough instructional materials to schools. Fresh teachers should be specifically targeted and trained in the pedagogical skills involved in teaching in the MT. progress should be closely monitored and appropriate remedy made as needed.

The policy should not be transient, and a way to ensure this is by encouraging teachers to integrate the MT in teaching of various subjects during the period of transition. In order to address negative attitudes to indigenous culture and languages, federal government should give formal and fuller recognition to the cultural day being currently celebrated in some states. Specific activities designed to call attention to and propagate local languages and cultures should be designed. Finally, one would want to submit that basic education curricula be reviewed now and periodically in order to reflect home-grown contemporary national developmental needs. The tendency to blindly mimick Western or Oriental educational models should be discontinued.

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