

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS A VEHICLE OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

*This study attempts to find out the extent to which the English Language has been a vehicle of social transformation in Nigeria. The concept of 'social', as used in this study, refers to human society, its organization and quality of life, while that of 'transformation, refers to the change in the quality of life in the society (Procter, Paul, et al (19). The study tries to establish to what extent the English language has been able to transcend the multilingual and multicultural nature of the Nigerian society in order to contribute positively to the attainment of a high level of educated awareness, social comfort, and mutual understanding in the country. There are many important factors which can contribute significantly to social transformation in any given society. Formal education, advances in Medicare, science and technology, among others, constitute some variable factors which can transform the Nigerian society and its individual citizens socially. However, these very important variables in social transformation are all learned, propagated and utilized in Nigeria mainly through the medium of English. It would appear that the process of social transformation in Nigeria would have been much slower if a sophisticated medium such as English were not available to the country. This study, however, restricts its examination to the language factor which is the repository of human endeavors and knowledge (Fishman 71).*

### Introduction

The social transformational effect of English as a second language in Nigeria has not received the keen interest of many Nigerian English scholars. So far, too much emphasis has been concentrated on the study of syntax, phonology and semantics of the English Language in Nigeria. It is therefore important that the English language as a second language in Nigeria be studied in the socio-linguistic context. At present, English provides various status-enhancing advantages which would make a citizen to prefer to become part of the English speech community in Nigeria.

English has ceased to be an exponent of only one culture, since it is now perhaps the world's most multicultural language (Kachru,20). The present multicultural character of English is clearly revealed in its uses around the globe, especially in creative writing. In the writing of Amos Tutuola, Cyprian Ekwensi, Gabriel Okara, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, to name a few, English is employed to project the Nigerian culture to the outside world. The English language is an important causal factor in the growth of Nigerian national consciousness and awareness. Indeed, learning English in Nigeria is effecting a social transformation, a detribalizing process, giving every Nigerian who learns it an opportunity of social mobility, status and prestige which the language bestows on its learner. English as Achebe (222) remarks has enabled the educated Nigerian to express the values of his surroundings to the whole world.

As Banjo (9) observes, functional literacy in English is much higher today and the rate of progress in learning this language is increasing very fast. There is hardly any home in Nigeria today where there would not be at least one person who can speak and write the English language. English has become the language of social identity among the myriad linguistic ethnic groups in Nigeria. It still serves as the most effective way by which Nigerians from different parts of the country communicate and do business with one another. English has made it possible for some groups to have power and prestige in our economy. Of course, since independence, the ability to speak English has virtually been a prerequisite, recurrent but unproclaimed for leadership in the country. Quite a significant number of educated Nigerians today conduct much of their public thinking in the English language and to some extent, their private lives too. The work will therefore study the effect of the English Language on our social lives generally and how the language has helped to transform our lives educationally, culturally and has principally kept us in unity as one Nigeria.

### **The English Language and Nigerian Languages**

The English Language will be examined along with Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo and Pidgin. At present, Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo are the most developed languages in Nigeria (Heine, Unoh,33). They are used officially and unofficially by governors and commissioners at the state level. Electronic media houses broadcast in the languages. Many advertisements which were hitherto exclusively broadcast in English in electronic media are now made in Hausa in the North, Yoruba in the west and Igbo in the East. Even football commentaries are now run in Hausa in some radio stations in the North. Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba serve as mediums of instruction in the lower classes of primary school and they are studied as subjects up to the university level. Hausa, as Heine (152) points out, is the major lingua franca in Northern Nigeria while Igbo and Yoruba still remain the major lingua franca in Eastern and Western Nigeria respectively.

However, the fact that these three major Nigerian languages - Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are not used as mediums of instruction from senior classes of primary school up to the University level seriously reduces their status. A candidate who wishes to study any of the three languages at the University level would still need to pass the English language at credit level in the West African School Certificate Examination, his high grades in any of the other languages notwithstanding, The English Language, according to Adesanoye (154) and Quirk et al (49) is at the moment the world's premier language. Today English is growing up as the most common "international" language spoken by more people and used as a second language in more countries than, is the case with any other language used outside national boundaries. It may be said that English is the language of science and technology. Actually, more scientific material is translated into English than into any other language in the world (Larry Smith, 40).

Bowen (9) estimated the number of those who use English to be about 600 million, of whom about 300 million are native speakers while another 300 million are users who have 'picked up' the language or have learned it through formal instruction to a level where they can *use* it for some purpose or other, however limited and instrumental. To him these figures make it likely that English is the language that has the largest number of non-native users in the world.

Furthermore, while referring to the presence of English in West Africa, John Spencer remarks:

English has become relatively at home there... Newspapers are produced in English, journals in English grow in number year by year, and parliamentary debates are for most part held in English. West Africans are contributing, often through the medium of impeccable English, to scientific thought and historical investigation, and the new poetry, drama and fiction in English which is now emerging from West Africa is catching the imagination and commanding, the admiration of the English reading world.

(2)

Among the literate population in Nigeria, English is an indispensable complement to the local language in the everyday lives of those who are involved directly or indirectly with government institutions or establishment. What Clive Crippen and Peter Ladefoged (19) observe as the functions of the English Language in Uganda are also true of Nigeria. English remains the language of public address by the Head of State/President and the Ministers at the federal level, governors and commissioners at the state level and all the Ministry officials; and the language of most offices and businesses. It is in fact the lingua franca of the educated elite in the country. Even in linguistically homogeneous states like Anambra, Imo, Ogun, and Kano to mention a few, as Adeniran (57)

observes all edicts, policy decisions and formal consultations on behalf of government are carried out in English. In commerce and industry as Adeniran further observes:

English is the language of formal transaction in employment (e.g. applications, interviews), in business consultations, say between factory owners and suppliers of materials, in placing orders and clearing goods, etc. Even when company employees are both native speakers of (the same indigenous language) English formalizes their official relations. (59)

### **The Learning of English and the Process of Social Transformation in Nigeria**

English as a second language in Nigeria has been serving as a vehicle for social transformation in the country. This is because as one of Nigeria's official language (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba have been accorded official status in the 1999 constitution), English has come to be seen probably as the country's most important language because it is the language of government, business, commerce, banking, mass communication (electronic and print media) and most of the inter-ethnic communication (Brosnahan, 60 Adetugbo, 30). In all these, the major functions of language - personal, social, directive, referential and imaginative - are performed in varying degrees by the English language in Nigeria.

According to Afolayan (9) it is the role of English that mostly defines its status as a second language in Nigeria. There are a large number of educated Nigerians who use English in all their daily endeavors. In most cases, the linguistic competence and performance of these educated Nigerians is nearly equal to their linguistic competence and performance in their mother tongue.

The only major difference between the first language (L1) and the English as a second language (L2) in Nigeria is that L1 is a part of the learner's culture (Edward Sapir, 1921) in a manner that the English as a second language is not. The L1 is the tool by which the learner has explored, established and preserved his culture for his use through everyday expression before he receives adequate knowledge of L2.

The most obvious contrast between the language-learning and language-acquisition situations is in the amount of exposure to the language. English as a second language is mostly learnt within the four walls of the classroom in schools. It is the school system that mostly promotes and propagates the learning of English throughout the country. Children are taught subject matter in mother-tongue only up to primary three. Even then, English is introduced as a second language throughout these first three years, after which the children learn all or most of their subjects through English in compliance with most of the primary school syllabi in the country (Dare, 437)

Ability to speak English has become synonymous with education, sophistication and civilization in Nigeria (Sofenwa, 119). Therefore, literacy at present is synonymous in the minds of most Nigerians with the ability to read and write the English language.

As Lambert et al, quoted by David M. Smith (70) have pointed out, the orientation a learner has towards the language learning situation has an important bearing on his motivation and hence on his potential facility in the language. If his orientation is primarily instrumental, he will be likely to acquire less competence in the Language than one whose orientation is integrative.

The instrumental function is the function that language serves in satisfying the learner's needs, what Jack C. Richards (88) calls utilitarian purposes, and of enabling him to obtain the goods and services that he wants (Halliday, 19) whereas, the Integrative function here, as Banjo (98) remarks, presupposes identification not with the native speakers of the language in Britain and the United States, but with the true Nigerian bilinguals, who incidentally, are to be distinguished from Ali Mazrui's emerging race of Afro-saxon (Mazrui,49) Integration in this sense therefore presupposes the acceptance within Nigeria of a socially acceptable and internationally intelligible variety of English.

The learning of the English language is very crucial to the social development of Nigeria today and perhaps will remain so for a long time. If the Federal Government fulfils its promise of making primary school education free and compulsory, as it is becoming evident from its recent acceptance to contribute 65% to the funding of primary / secondary schools education in the country, it means that by the year 2020, nearly all pupils between ages of 12 and 18 will be at least bilingual (in their native language and English). As it is at present in Nigeria, whoever knows the English language has ready access to all the vast intellectual wealth, which according to Spencer (50) "all the wisest nations of the earth have created and hoarded in the course of ninety generations".

### **The Transformational Effect of the English Language on Nigerian Languages**

The English language has various effects on the Nigerian Languages despite the fact that Nigerian languages are widening their domain of operation as stated above. As Unoh (98) observes, it would be true to assert that three major Nigerian Languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) are the most widely spoken, the most systematically and consistently promoted and developed through governmental patronage. Furthermore, they are the most widely written in both literary and technical sense, the most standardized from the point of view of orthography and metalanguage and the most widely taught at primary, secondary and tertiary educational levels and the most widely used in formal situations.

However, as Unoh further points out (28) it would be equally true to say that these languages lack specialized vocabularies for effective dissemination of information both orally and in writing, in various fields of human activity and learning. The English Language is at present, the only language viewed as furthering information at various age and intellectual levels throughout Nigeria. Thus, the extensive use of English in various fields of human endeavor in Nigeria seems to have reduced the functions and domains of almost all the Nigerian languages considerably.

### **The English Language as a Mirror of Nigeria Culture**

Acbebe has predicted

that the English Language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings. (105)

This prediction is currently becoming true in the Nigerian context when we consider the transformational effect of the English Language spoken in Nigeria. Even though English is "in full communion with its ancestral home" (because English spoken in Nigeria is not significantly different from the standard British English) it is now used among the multilingual and multicultural ethnic groups to carry the weight of Nigerian experience. As Adeniran (54) and Peter Young (167) observe, Nigerians are not denationalised by using English. Instead, the educated Nigerians who use English remain Nigerians in thought, outlook and feeling. The Nigerian English speakers are not steeped in the British culture. Many speakers who use English today in Nigeria for their inter- and intra-personal interactions are no more conscious of the fact that the language was that of colonial masters who colonized Nigeria from 1914 to 1960. The Federal Government of Nigeria seems to consider it a linguistic "heritage" (Bamgbose,36) which must be maintained and treasured along with other Nigerian indigenous languages.

English is viewed as furthering the socio-cultural integration at the national level in the country. In actual fact, Nigerian citizenship seems to be guaranteed in the most meaningful sense by the English language (Banjo,180). This is because as pointed out earlier, it is the Nigerian who has a minimum qualification of school certificate, who will be able to rule Nigeria as stipulated in the 1999 Nigerian Constitution. This means a Nigerian who is not literate in English would not have the right to rule whereas every Nigerian by right of citizenship should have the right not only to be ruled but also to rule. In this instance, the English Language could be viewed as gradually

creating a national culture which shows how one can participate in the act of governance of our nation. This means then that the English Language helps to promote our national yearnings, aspirations and inspiration, and common goals and ideals above the whims and caprices of ethnicism and statism in the country. English can be logically assessed as the language of culture at almost all levels above the local in Nigeria.

As Mueller (98) observes, culture could probably not have originated, without language and language would be nearly empty without culture. Culture, as Alder (79) defines it is:

...an intertwined system of values and attitudes, beliefs and norms that give meaning and significance to both individual and collective identity,

Relatively, understanding the English Language in the Nigerian context involves not only having a knowledge of its grammar, phonology and lexis but also a Knowledge of certain features and characteristics of this so-called intertwined system of values and attitudes, beliefs and norms, to which the Nigerian users of the language subscribe. The English language mirrors the culture of Nigeria as a nation following Firnocchiaro Mary and Bonomo Michael (97). As Bates and Julian Joseph (23) contend, culture consists of shared Ideas which people in a community have learned and preserved from their past experience. Nigeria's shared ideas include all varieties of knowledge, morals, law, religions, beliefs, social rules, customs, myths and every conception of art and beauty. These shared ideas constitute our national culture which supersedes any tribal or ethnic solidarity and loyalty. It is a culture which Nigeria as a country cherishes. It embodies our combined efforts and struggle for existence as a nation. This national culture provides a summation of our past experience that is an indispensable foundation for our living in the present and development in the future.

It is a Nigerian modern culture which does not see a Nigerian as Hausa, Yoruba, Ibo, etc. but as a true Nigerian who, by virtue of his ability to speak and write the English Language, can work in any of the 36 states of the federation. It is the English language that promises every Nigerian a common tongue acquired through formal education which he can use "to defend Nigeria's unity and uphold her honour and glory"

### **The English Language as a Symbol of Nigerian unity**

Perhaps, if Nigeria had not adopted the English language as her official language, she might not have been able to transform herself into a nation of political and social cohesion because of her multilingual and multi-cultural diversity. About 400 different languages are spoken in the country (Tiffen,65 Bamgbose,36). Many of these languages are spoken by only a few thousand people and

are usually restricted to small geographical areas. They are used in the home and in local affairs. In many cases, such languages have no established writing system and the available literature about them are scanty. Yet, for the people who speak these languages, their role is central to the daily affairs of life in the country. The importance and place of language in the lives of the people affected may be too easily underestimated. Still it must be said that most of the 400 languages (Bamgbose, 36); taken individually, are severely restricted in function within the whole of the Nigerian society.

According to Jacobs (59) the major languages of Nigeria will be operationally defined as being those languages with 300,000 or more speakers. These languages are the ones that are used over wide geographical areas. They are taught in the schools and they are used as media of instruction in the first three years of primary education. Some of these languages, for example Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and Efik, are offered in the West African School Certificate *and* General Certificate of Education examinations. But only a relatively few Nigerians speak more than one of these languages in the country at present.

In actual fact, any attempt to adopt any of these major languages in Nigeria as a national language is likely to cause a staggering political upheaval whose end might be difficult to predict. In Nigeria today, every linguistic group still attaches loyalty to its language. Jacobs (9) narrates some events in Canada, Belgium and particularly in India, where scores have been killed during language riots. These language riots demonstrate that languages may serve as a source of disunity. There have been numerous language riots in India (according to Gregory and Carroll (1978)) in opposition to making Hindi the official language. These riots offer ample evidence of local resistance to government language policy (Inglehart and Woodward,72).

However, not to have a language in common with one's compatriot is to have a stranger for a countryman. It is under such conditions as the lack of a common language that suspicion and distrust flourish. Aside from the important psychological and sociological aspects of language, the practical matters of national communication and commerce must be considered. According to Le Page (15) any effective government should preside over one homogeneous linguistic community. Government cannot function unless there is a common language which the people can, understand. This is the main reason why the national language question has been a recurrent preoccupation among nations with extreme multilingualism. And as Haugen (10) and Labov (19) put it, every self-respecting nation has to have a language, for a language to become a national language, certain very important features are needed. In the first place, as Le Page (1964) argues, a language to be adopted as a national language should be a neutral language to all the linguistic groups adopting it as their national language. If an adopted national language is not neutral to all the linguistic components in



the multilingual community in question, it is too often regarded merely as a tool by which a particular language group seeks to extend its domination over all other linguistic groups whose languages are not chosen. The issue may become political and inflammatory.

It is difficult for people to collaborate when they cannot understand each other's language (Rundle Stanley, 194). This may be the reason why English has flourished so much in the country, As Spencer (28) claims, the English language was often regarded as the primary criterion for defining Nigerian nationhood. The unification of the country under colonialism was achieved through the medium of this language, and the struggle for independence was thus necessarily conducted and achieved by means of it.

Though the 1999 Nigerian constitution accords Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba official recognition in the National Assembly, those who are bilingual in these Nigerian major languages and English still find it more convenient to communicate with government functionaries through English. Furthermore, it is on record that the present administration of the National Assembly carry out the National Assembly businesses in English Language. They employ English because to debate through Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba would require that the Languages be interpreted to those who could only speak one of these Nigerian Languages. Without interpreters, some of the Assembly men in the National Assembly would be cut off at one time or the other.

For example, whenever Yoruba is spoken all those who do not speak Yoruba (though they may speak Igbo or Hausa) would be cut off. But the interpretation process would slow down the daily deliberations of the House thereby making the atmosphere in the National Assembly very boring and sluggish. In another dimension, as Amayo (316) observes:

...by the time four speakers have addressed the House in four different Languages (English, Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) each of which has to be translated into three other languages because none of them is understood by everyone, we may have succeeded in building United Nations Of Nigeria but surely not a United Nigeria.

From the foregoing therefore, it is clear that the English language has ever been a vehicle for the gradual unification of this country, transforming its peoples from a state of linguistic diversity to that of a common speech community.

## **Conclusion**

There is no gain saying that the English language in Nigeria remains a very strong vehicle of social transformation in all spheres of our lives. English is the only language that is acceptable to

all Nigerians irrespective of their political or ethnic leanings.

As Bamgbose (85), Unoh (60) and Odumuh (89: 37) observe, English is still the language that makes cooperative effort and joint action possible throughout the Federation. English helps to de-emphasize ethnic loyalty and facilitates national interest across the nation. It also facilitates socio-culture and political integration at nation-wide (hence national) level in the country.

Conclusively therefore, the fact still remains that English is also the language that has made it possible for the elite from the many different linguistic groups in the Federation to have meaningful interaction when it comes to national issues. English, as Adeniran (29) observes, is still the vehicle of widest inter-ethnic communication in Nigeria.

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