Another perspective to a common local language for Nigeria

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Abstract

At last the three major Nigerian languages have been promoted via the constitution and the National Policy on Education as national languages. The term, national language, is misapplied (cf. Mbagwu and Obiorah, 2007). The languages are better described as regional official languages (Wardhaugh, 1998:449): they are largely spoken in the regions where they are native. That is, there are a negligible number of Nigerians who speak the three languages. This paper explains, with reference to a study reported here, that most Nigerians have not accepted the languages and might not accept any other because of their high regard for foreign languages, especially English. The paper expresses hope that this negative attitude could change if Nigerians are made to appreciate that the Mother Tongue is very important in computation, perception and interpreting and that all the Nigerian languages belong to one phylum. In other words, any of the local languages would reflect shared origin and sentiments and is therefore better than any borrowed (foreign) languages.

1.0 Introduction

That Nigeria is linguistically complex is common knowledge. This complexity has been a problem, especially in relation to the selection of a national language, that is, an indigenous language that would satisfy all the communication needs of the country. Many attempts made in this regard ended in the selection of three languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, which are designated major languages because of the demographic strength of their speakers. Unfortunately, these languages are national languages in principle and not in practice. This is because only a few Nigerians could speak the three languages. It is on this premise that Wardhaugh (1998:449) rates them as regional official languages. Mbagwu and Obiorah (2007)

support Wardhaugh's position. Clearly, the non-acceptance of the three major languages reveals that the acceptance of one of the three or any other is highly unworkable. This paper investigates why such a situation exists. In other words, the working hypothesis of the paper is "the successful selection of an indigenous language or languages as national language or languages is hardly possible".

2.0 Methodology

The data for this investigation are gathered by a questionnaire. 250 copies of the questionnaire were administered. Out of this number 200 were recovered fully filled. The respondents were selected to represent a good number of the different linguistic groups in the country. Deductive analysis of the data has been done. Moreover, the writer would not deny any interference her personal observations and experiences in the analysis of the data.

2.1 Data presentation and analysis.

The data presented here are responses to questions 6-10 of the questionnaire. The questions aptly border on the thrust of the investigation. Questions 6 and 8 are yes/no questions; Question 7 has options while 9 and 10 are content questions:

Question 6: Do you consider a common language for Nigeria necessary?
Question 7: If yes, which Nigerian language(s)?
One of the major languages; All the major languages; None of the major languages;
Question 8: Do you advocate for a neutral language like English or Swahili?
Question 9: If yes, what are your reasons?
Question 10: Please suggest ways by which a common language can be evolved without causing disorder.

May it be noted that the responses to questions 6-8 are presented in a table of percentage while those of the content questions are reported indirectly.



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Table 1: Responses to Questions 6-8

Question 6	**No. of Respondents**	**%**
Yes	135	67.5
No	30	15
No answer	35	17.5
Total	200	100
Question 7	**No. of Respondents**	**%**
One of the major languages	15	7.5
All the major languages	56	28
None of the major languages	113	56.5
No answer	16	8
Total	200	100
Question 8	**No. of Respondents**	**%**
Yes	129	64.5
No	71	35.5
Total	200	100

Table 1 shows that many Nigerians know the importance of having a common language. This is evident in 67.5% of the respondents answering yes to Question 6. Unfortunately, a problem arises concerning which local language or languages could be selected to serve in the status. 56.5% of the respondents think none of the major languages should be selected. The implication here is that many Nigerians do not accept the major languages as national languages. I make bold to state that the 7.5% of the respondents who desire one of the major languages and the 28% who select all the major languages might have one of the major languages as their native language. Support for this is in the following words of Kottak (2004:367),

"Members of an ethnic group may define themselves – and/or be defined by others – as different and special because of their language, religion, geography, history, ancestry, or physical traits.". In other words, speakers of the major languages would like to protect their linguistic identity in the face of linguistic complexity.

Lastly, 64.5% of the respondents stand for a neutral language. By simple intuition, one would know that a majority of this percentage are speakers of languages that are not the major ones. However, some speakers of the major languages who appreciate the connection between language and ethnicity would take such position to protect the interest of the other linguistic groups. For instance, Mbagwu and Ezenwafor (2008) argue that the language policy of Nigeria has an implication for the differentiated legal status policy, which gives attention to selected languages. According to them, the selection amounts to segregation and favouritism. They therefore recommend that the non-intervention type of language policy should be adopted by the country. This is because this does not lean on linguistic imperialism, linguistic protectionism or purism, and linguistic separatism or isolationism.

In fact, the position of Mbagwu and Ezenwafor is implicated in the response of most of the respondents. They think that every Nigerian language is important and qualifies to be a national language. In other words, selecting any would mean that it is more important than others. To check negative sentiments associated with this, the respondents think a neutral language is a better option.

It is disheartening to note that none of the respondents suggested ways by which a local language can evolve as a common language in the country. That is, Question 10 receives no answer. This shows that Nigerians would rather accept foreign languages than any local language. This has an implication for the extent to which different linguistic groups appreciate one another. In the section below, the implication of disregarding local languages is discussed.

3.0 The Implication

There are different positions concerning the number of languages in Nigeria. Greenberg (1971) estimates 248 languages; Hanford (1976) puts the number at 395 languages; Bamgbose (1978) gives 513 languages; Elugbe (1990) comments that it is between 394 – 400; while Udoh (2003:18) records 505 languages. Whatever is the number, the obvious is that there are many languages in Nigeria. Earlier, there was a two-way classification of the languages into major and minor. This classification is faulted by Bamgbose (1991:4) because the term 'minor' contradicts the thesis of linguistic egalitarianism (cf. Mbagwu, 2007). Bamgbose's

classification in support of linguistic egalitarianism is as follows: major languages, main languages, and small area languages.

Note that Bamgbose's classification reduces Unoh's (1987) classification into terms. Onoh categorizes the languages into Group A, Group B, and Group C: Group A comprises the major languages, Group B consists of main languages, that is, languages used in the media and other formal situations in their home states, e.g. Edo, Efik, Ibibio, Fufude, Kanuri, Nupe, Tiv, Ogoni, Igala; Urhobo etc. Group C consists of the small area languages, that is, languages spoken by relatively fewer people from small districts, divisions and/or local government areas.

The number of languages in the country vis-à-vis the disregard accorded the languages by Nigerians is responsible for the unworkable language policy the country has (cf. Mbagwu and Ezenwafor, 2008 and Okorji and Mbagwu, 2008). And as it is widely acknowledged, a country without a language policy or a bad one has planned to fail (cf. Junaidu, 2008). In fact, I do not think that the number of languages is too much of a problem; it is the attitude of Nigerians to their languages that is the problem. Nigerians only look forward to adequate participation in international communication. They feel that none of their languages is well-equipped for that but they are deceived and this deception has enslaved them to English, which, worse still, has not produced the anticipated national development. That is why the education sector as well as other sectors experiences one difficulty or the other.

For there to be a workable language policy, Nigerians must, as a matter of fact, change their attitude to the local languages. If Nigerians appreciate the emphasis that the mother tongue is very important in computation, perception and interpreting, they would change the attitude and begin to regard the local languages. Again, if they understand that all the Nigerian languages belong to one phylum, they would know that any of the local languages would reflect shared origin and sentiments and is therefore better than any borrowed languages: borrowed languages are borrowed cultures and borrowed cultures are difficult to manage, hence, they yield underdevelopment instead of development.

4.0 Conclusion

In the above, it has been illustrated why a local language or any local languages would be hardly accepted generally as a national language or languages. For instance, 64.5% of the respondents do not think any Nigerian languages qualify as a common language of communication. They prefer a foreign language to act in such capacity. One could readily think that they take such a position because they feel

that there is hardly a way in which justice could be done if one or a few out of many languages is/are selected. As I have pointed out, this smacks of ignorance: first, if they appreciate the emphasis that the mother tongue is very important in computation, perception and interpreting; they would not take the position; secondly, if they understand that all the Nigerian languages belong to one phylum, they would know that any of the local languages would reflect shared origin and sentiments and is therefore better than any borrowed languages.

I hereby recommend that the linguists and other language scholars who have in-depth understanding of the importance of the local languages should embark on enlightenment campaigns to enable Nigerians begin to appreciate their languages and the common origin they share. With this, Nigerians can readily accept any of them as a language of wider communication, official or national language.

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