

## The English Language, Politics and the Issues of Multi-Ethnicity in Nigeria

P. A. Ezema

### Abstract

The introductory section of the article reflects on the key terms in the title. These include Language/the English Language, politics and multi-ethnicity. The thrust of the paper revolves on these key words, hence the need for this reflection. The role played by English in politics in Nigeria at both national and international levels is fully discussed. The negative influence of politics on the use of the English language in the country is not lost sight of in the paper. Emphasized in the write-up is the fact that the indigenous Nigerian languages also play some significant role in the political life of Nigerians. The multi-ethnic nature of Nigeria and its far-reaching implications are thoroughly discussed. The implications include multilingualism and inter-ethnic linguistic rivalry, which impede the realization of some worthy linguistic goals in the country. In the paper the various functions of English as a result of the multilingual nature of the country are identified and highlighted. In conclusion, the paper summarizes the role of English in Nigeria and observes that there are some linguistic issues that call for an urgent attention as far as the linguistic situation in the country is concerned. Three recommendations are made with these issues

### Introduction

The key words in this write-up are: ‘the English language’, ‘politics’ and ‘multi-ethnicity’. These are among the terms very much used today in every nook and cranny of the globe. It is pertinent to reflect briefly here on these key words since the thrust of this paper revolves round them.

Language is a human social phenomenon utilized by people in their everyday life. People often wrongly perceive the term in an abstract way. However, on the contrary, much of our understanding of reality is dependent on language. Language determines our models of the world and the way in which we represent the world. It is in view of this reality of language that Victoria, et al (2007: 407), quoting Whitman, warns that “Language is not an abstract construction of the learned, or of dictionary makers, but is something arising out of the work, needs, ties, joys, affections, and tastes of long generations of humanity.” This phenomenon undoubtedly permeates every aspect of man’s life.

The qualities of language, as highlighted above, aptly apply to the English Language. It is now universally accepted that English is a world language. The language is used in all the corners of the globe. As McCrum (1986: 56) succinctly puts it, “The English language surrounds us like a sea and, like the waters of the deep, it is full of mysteries”.

Stressing the universal nature of the language, Brumfit (1995: 14) makes the following observation:

Certainly it is now true that the English language is no longer the exclusive property of speakers of English as mother tongue or first language. The ownership of English rests with the people who use it, however, Multi-lingual they are, or however monolingual they are.

Similarly, Baugh (1959: 61) sees English as the mother tongue of nations. Adducing reasons for this status of the language, he asserts that the combined political influence, economic soundness, the commercial activities, the social well-being, and the scientific and cultural contributions of these nations to civilization account for the large number of the users of the language at the international level. The contributions of English to world civilization are, undoubtedly, immeasurable.

Politics also belongs properly to man's nature. It concerns the organization of the affairs of a society for the common good of the society members. Every political system in a country strives as a duty to achieve peace, prevent social strife, lay emphasis on good citizenship, uphold justice and fair play and emphasize respect for people's fundamental rights, accepting as a fact that power belongs to the people and the exercise of it must be in conformity with the people's ethics. In short, politics is so relevant to human society that it is often asserted that man is a political animal. On the other hand, some people regard politics as a dirty game. In actual fact, politics in itself is not dirty. The problem is that some people play it in a dirty way. If it is played according to rules, people benefit immensely from it. This is why Ojukwu (1989: 23) in recognition of the need to play politics according to rules stresses that;

every game, whether we call it football or politics, has its rules which must be obeyed. While in politics, we should avoid intellectual conceit or dishonesty. We should shine the light of conscience on the darkest crevices of our thoughts.

Multi-ethnicity, like language and politics, is a term very much associated with the modern society. It is nowadays a part of the much used vocabulary of the people. Multi-ethnicity, as a factor, has generated several social, political, economic and linguistic issues that affect the life of people all over the world. This paper focuses fully on the relevance of English to politics in Nigeria and the role the language plays in the country as a multi-ethnic nation. The relative importance of English and the indigenous Nigerian languages, as far as politics in Nigeria is concerned and the role played by English in the country as a multi-ethnic nation will be fully discussed.

#### The Relationship between the English Language and Politics in Nigeria

The role played by English in politics in this country can be viewed in several respects. One of these respects is its relevance in the political education of Nigerians. Political education of the citizens of a nation is of crucial importance in politics. As obtained in the areas of other human endeavour, handling politics successfully requires some skills. Handling

political issues and people effectively by a politician entails possessing high level political skills. English plays an important role in the acquisition of political skills and is an important instrument in the hands of politicians as far as handling political issues and people is concerned. The language is an important medium through which politicians acquire political awareness from both books and the speeches of more experienced politicians. Furthermore, a politician who is well versed in English can easily win support from his listeners through the way he manipulates the language.

The usefulness of the English language in political education in Nigeria is quite outstanding. The language is the main medium through which politicians acquire political education. Furthermore, it is the major medium through which politicians educate their followers. Politics as a course of study features prominently in the curriculum of the Nigerian educational system. English is the major language through which this course of study is taught and studied in the country's educational institutions. Similarly, it is an incontrovertible fact that the majority of the textbooks on politics are written in English. In short, English is often the medium used by people who decide to give one written political account or the other.

The place of language in the thinking ability of an individual should not be ignored while considering the role of English in politics in this country. For a politician to be able to influence and convince his followers, his ability to think effectively should not be in doubt. Language enhances people's ability to think. It is a creative power, a means through which we do most of our thinking. This is why Benzies (1940: 22) emphasizes that

we can scarcely think at all without using words. Even if we do not speak, we are constantly using words in our heads to help us to think. It is hard to imagine thought going on at all without using words.

As the major language of politics in Nigeria, English performs the role of enhancing the quality of thought of Nigerian politicians in their political engagements.

English is also a force to be reckoned with in the overall political activities in this country. It is mainly in the language that the majority of political activities are carried out. Speech making, declaration of manifestoes and electioneering campaigns are carried out mainly in the English language. Furthermore, the language plays a crucial role as far as Nigerians' participation in international politics is concerned. This fact will be fully appreciated when it is remembered that the world is rapidly turning into a global village. English is the major language of globalization. Similarly, international politics is a glaring aspect of globalization. It is through the use of English that Nigerians participate in international politics. The fact that Nigerians participate actively in international politics accounts for the important roles they play in world bodies. Recently, a Nigerian was the Secretary General of the Commonwealth of Nations. Currently Nigerians occupy important positions in other international bodies. The participation of Nigerians in international politics can hardly be possible without the English language. It is the major language of globalization. French is the language that comes next to it as far as globalization is concerned. It is pertinent, however, to point out here that politics has also negatively influenced the use of English in Nigeria. The way most Nigerian politicians use the language has corrupted the English of Nigerians, particularly the young users of the language. As

Ezema (1996: 41) puts it, most speakers at political rallies and other public gatherings unwittingly corrupt the English of the young ones. In most marathon political speeches delivered by politicians, English is invariably the language used. An obvious fact is that many of the politicians who deliver such speeches are not well trained in the use of English.

Nigerian politicians are fond of using stale imagery, high blown and dying metaphors, clichés and outmoded stale phrases in addition to committing serious concord, tense, pronunciation and sentence structural errors. Examples of dying metaphors which feature prominently in political speeches and writing in Nigeria include 'take up the cudgel for', 'toe the line', 'an axe to grind', 'fishing in troubled waters', among others. Also common in such speeches and writing are those meaningless words as 'clarion', 'realm', 'expedite', 'ameliorate', 'status quo' and many others. These are political expressions abused and consciously used in a dishonest way to deceive people. Unfortunately, they form sources of corrupt influences on the use of English in the country. Young users of English particularly fall victims to these influences. They regard these expressions as models which they should emulate.

It has been established so far in this paper that English plays a crucial role in the practice of politics in Nigeria. This fact should not, however, lead to the conclusion that it is the only language of importance in politics in the country. The indigenous Nigerian languages also play some significant role in the political life of Nigerians. At the local and even state levels, the languages are very much utilized in politics. While English is mainly the language of politics at the national and international levels in Nigeria, the indigenous languages are of tremendous importance in the grassroots politics of the country.

### The English Language and Multi-ethnicity in Nigeria

#### The Multi-ethnic Nature of Nigeria as a Nation

Nigeria is a typical multi-ethnic nation. Based on the figures of 2006 national census, the country is populated by over 140 million people who belong to numerous different ethnic groups. According to Akindele and Adegbite (1999: 70), there are over 250 such ethnic groups in Nigeria. As a corollary to this fact, the country is also multilingual. The exact number of the indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria is not known for certain. As quoted by Olagoke (1979: 19), Greenberg puts the number of languages used in the country at 248; Tiffen puts it at over 150, while Bamgbose puts it at over 400. On the other hand, according to the 2006 census figures referred to earlier above, 390 indigenous languages are spoken by various ethnic nationalities across the country. There is, therefore, no agreement among scholars on the exact number of the indigenous Nigerian languages spoken in Nigeria. What is certain is that there are several hundreds of languages used in the country.

The implications for this multi-ethnic and multilingual nature of Nigeria are far reaching. As a result of this situation, inter-ethnic communication in Nigerian languages is seriously restricted. The majority of these languages are spoken and understood only within the geographical areas where they exist. The situation has also generated immense inter-ethnic linguistic rivalry among different ethnic groups in the country. This rivalry tends to impede the realization of any worthy linguistic goal aimed at enhancing the national language policy. Nigeria is yet to have a clear and well articulated policy on the status and role of English in the country. Furthermore, the multiplicity of languages with its attendant cultural pluralism raises some other fundamental issues with regard to curriculum

development and implementation in the country. It is unrealistic to expect that all these languages can be taught in our schools. Consequently most of the languages exist only in the spoken form. This implies that English is the only major language of documentation in the country. Non-availability of instructional materials and the problem of qualified teachers seriously militate against the teaching of the languages in institutions of learning.

#### The Implication of Multi-ethnicity on the Use of English in Nigeria

The problem of multi-ethnicity in Nigeria is by far much more felt in the linguistic arena than in any other aspect of national life. The near chaotic linguistic situation created by multi-ethnicity in the country has adversely affected efforts made to initiate an effective language policy in the country and implement same. As a result of the intense inter-ethnic linguistic rivalry among different ethnic groups, no single indigenous Nigerian language has emerged as a national language in the country. The issue of a national language for Nigeria has been politicized to such an extent that it has become a very delicate and sensitive matter. This fact is vividly captured in the words of Emenyonu and Nta (1990: 101) in their observation that “The choice of a national language has become more a political than linguistic issue. Ethnic groups in the country interpret the choice of any language as the country’s lingua franca as a way of conferring political domination on that particular group.”

It is indeed necessary here to observe that in a country with a multilingual setting like Nigeria, utmost caution should be taken in the choice of a lingua franca. This is necessary in order to integrate the diverse cultural, ethnic and linguistic groups.

It is in order to diffuse inter-ethnic linguistic tension and for the fact that no single indigenous Nigerian language is spoken and understood throughout Nigeria that English, the language inherited from the colonial masters, has been adopted as the official language of the country. The role of English in national life of an average Nigerian is inestimable. In order to participate effectively in the social, political and economic aspects of national life, a Nigerian must attain some level of competence in the language. For him to follow intelligently in what goes on in national life, he has to read newspapers, listen to the radio, and also listen to and watch television programmes which are largely conducted in English. It is for this reason that Jowith (1995: 67) stresses that the importance of English in the national context is unparalleled, pointing out that the decision-making and opinion-forming elements of the nation use English to articulate their relations with one another and to address the widest possible pan-Nigerian audience. Mohammed (1995: 118), on the other hand, justifies the importance attached to English in Nigeria with the fact that Nigerians need it as a common language to talk to each other in addition to using it as a tool for the acquisition of modern knowledge for their self development. Bamgbose (1977: 31) observes that, while the indigenous languages can be seen as a tool for promoting desirable cultural diversity, ethnic identity and psychological security, English, as an international language, has an inalienable role to play as a tool for communication with other countries and cultural groups and also nationally as the language of administration, law, commerce, education and the mass media.

It is, indeed, not surprising that the English language has been assigned many important roles in Nigeria in spite of the presence of hundreds of other languages. To explain this situation, Jowitt (1995: 75) points out that many Nigerians consider English to be neutral in the ethnopolitical context. The language is not indigenous to any of the numerous ethnic

groups in the country. Similarly, Adama (1989: 26) sees English as “a compromise candidate” in the quest for a national language in Nigeria. It is his view that the adoption of one of the so-called three major indigenous languages as the national language would have meant the alienation of large sections of the citizenry, bearing in mind especially the current atmosphere in the country, which is bedevilled by ethnic nationalism or parochialism.

### **Conclusion/Recommendations: The Need to Make English More Functional and More Permeating to different Segments of Nigerian Life**

The role played by English in Nigeria is quite tremendous as a result of the multi-ethnic and multilingual nature of the country. In the social, economic and political aspects of national life, the language is indispensable. To a large extent, it is an important tool for national unity and cohesion. Furthermore, it is mainly through English that Nigerians interact effectively and fruitfully with people from other nations.

It should not be thought, however, that all is well with the linguistic situation in Nigeria. There are definitely certain urgent issues that call for attention as far as this situation is concerned. The following three recommendations are, therefore, made in connection with these issues:

- i) In view of the fact that English performs diverse functions in Nigerian society, encompassing government, politics, law, science and industry, among others, there should be a more functional approach to the teaching of the language. The current international trend to make the teaching of the language more functional should be embraced. In line with this trend we now have such concepts as English as a language of wider communication (ELWC), English for Special Purposes (ESP) and English for Science and Technology (EST). These concepts should be taken into consideration while designing and revising the English curriculum in the country’s educational system. This will make the teaching and learning of the language more functional.
- ii) All the segments of Nigerian society should have equal access to the effective teaching and learning of English. The current disadvantages experienced by students of the language in rural areas should be brought to an end. These students should have the same opportunity to enjoy modern trends in the teaching and learning of the language as their counterparts in urban areas. This will enable all Nigerian students of English to acquire adequate functional and communicative competence in the language irrespective of where they reside in the country.
- iii) The indigenous languages are veritable vehicles for the transmission and preservation of the country’s rich cultural heritage. The languages are also useful in terms of wider and more effective interaction among people of different ethnic groups in the country. In short, they complement the role played by English in Nigeria. The need to promote the study and use of these languages is, therefore, an urgent one. The ultimate goal in this regard should be to raise the status of one of these languages to that of the national as well as the official language of the country.

## References

- Adama, E.O. (1989). "The Roles and functions of English as a Second Language in Nigeria." In Jibril, M. et al (eds.). Handbook for Junior Secondary School English Language Teachers. Lagos: NERDC.
- Akindele, F. & Adebite, W. (1999). The Sociology and Politics of English in Nigeria. Ife: OAU Press.
- Bangbose, A. (1977). "Towards an Implementation of Nigeria's Language Policy in Education." In Bangbose, A. (ed.). Language in Education in Nigeria, vol. 1, Lagos: The National Language Centre.
- Baugh, A.C. (1959). A History of the English Language. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Benzies, D. (1940). Learning Our Language. London: Longman.
- Bloor, T. & Bloor, M. (2004). The Functional Analysis of English. London: Hodder Education.
- Brumfit, C.J. (1995). "English as a Second Language and English Language Teaching: Retrospect and Prospect." In Ayo, B. et al (eds.). New Englishes. Ibadan: Mosuro.
- Emenyonu, P.T. & Nta, E.G. (1990). Lingua Franca, Nationalism and the Nigeria Situation: A Research Report on Developing English Language skills in Secondary and Higher Education. Enugu: Harris Publishers Ltd.
- Ezema, P.A. (1996). "Sources of Corrupt Influences on the English Language of the Young Users." In Ezema, P.A. (ed.). Nigeria Research in Education. Eha-Amufu: Federal College of Education, Eha-Amufu.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (1981). National Policy on Education. (Revised). Lagos: NERDC.
- Jowitt, D. (1995). "Nigeria's National Language Question: Choices and Constraints." In Ayo, B. et al (eds.), New Englishes. Ibadan: Mosuro.
- Mohammed, A. (1995). "Communicative Acquisition in Infelicitous Learning Environment: The Problem with SSS English in Nigeria." In Ayo, B. et al (eds.), New Englishes. Ibadan: Mosuro.
- Ojukwu, O.E. (1989). Because I am Involved. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- Olagoke, O.O. (1979). "The Mother Tongue and ESL in Nigerian Education." In Ubahakwe, E. (ed.). The Teaching of English Studies. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Victoria, F. et al (2007). An Introduction to Language. Boston: Thomson and Wadsworth