
Multilingualism And Translation As Necessary Factors For Nigerian Language Policy

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Abstract

The study showed that Nigeria as a nation failed to recognize her source of strength, the invaluable asset of multilingualism. Our policy makers are myopic when it concerns policies in languages. Implementation of policies is also a problem for Nigerian Government. The Nigerian Governments easily make policies but do not always ensure strict implementation. Translation is also considered as very important for communication in a multilingual and multicultural nation.

1. INTRODUCTION:

1.1 MULTILINGUALISM: AN ASSET

Multilingualism, the ability to speak several or many languages, is a skill that many developed nations do not take for granted. To be able to understand even one additional language other than mother-tongue is a valuable asset for any individual and his nation. The above view is confirmed by many works on multilingualism including that of Hanna Komorowska (2011) and Efurosibina Adegbija (2004). There are many reasons why multilingual experience or multilingual characteristic should be valued. Learning a foreign language or language that is not mother-tongue increases one's range of communication. By learning another language, one gains knowledge of the customs and ways of life of other people. A foreign language, helps add to one's knowledge of own language. For example, people who studied Latin often do better in English language because many of the thousands of English words have their roots in Latin. The same thing goes for German. Many German words have their roots in Latin. This is the reason why in some German Universities, one must show evidence of certificate in Latin before one can get a Master's degree in German. Knowing a foreign language helps one to add to the general stock of information one already has. It can be the key that may unlock new fields of knowledge. One will be able to read books on any subject area in the foreign language one has mastered. A multilinguist can gain more easily, a spirit of broad human tolerance, as he finds that other people may speak, think and act in different ways which are not necessarily less desirable than his own. One also gets overjoyed as a multilinguist to find out, that there exist similarities of thoughts in many languages when one gets into the proverbs and idioms of different languages.

Nigeria is a multilingual nation. Multilingualism is a blessing, because, language and culture are peoples' means of self expression and Nigeria has it in abundance. Nigeria has failed to recognize as a source of strength, her invaluable asset - multilingualism as her attitude in language policies shows. In this paper we are going to approach multilingualism and translation from two levels namely: multilingualism and translation with respect to Nigerian languages, and, secondly with respect to foreign languages.

1.2 The Meaning of Translation

Translation is a communicative, linguistic art. Linguistically, the problems involved in translation process have been included in modern linguistics to tackle the difference between the methodologies of traditional theory of translation and modern one. Not until the middle of the 20th century was it possible to successfully move from a normative discussion of the problem of translation to an approach which dealt with its subject rationally and studied the process in a specific textual frame of reference. Slightly modifying the phrase used by Bertolt Brecht to describe literary scholarship as “*a mass of opinions*”. Wolfram Wilss described the many views expressed on translation in the past centuries “*as a mass of uncoordinated statements*”, some very significant contributions which were never coalesced into a coherent, agreed upon theory of translation (Wilss, 177:11). The science of translation is a cognitive, hermeneutic, associative one which captures linguistic utterances in a dynamic way. The science of translation seeks to answer the question on the possibilities and limits of transferability of texts, and of the similarity of the effect produced by the sources language text and that produced by the target language text (*SLT* and *TLT* respectively).

The establishment of communication between people belonging to different speech communities has long been an important form of linguistic performances. Little is known about the beginnings of translation. It is however known that interpreting, the oral form of translation, is older than the written counterpart. There is the tendency to mistake cause for effect in thinking of the diversification of speech communities in the world as has always been illustrated with the biblical story of the building of the Tower of Babel where it is argued that,

...Men were not scattered abroad because they could not understand one another's speech. They could not understand one another's speech because they were scattered: In the Babel story cause and effect have been turned around (Haugen, 1974:58).

The art of translation needs to be pursued on as scale great enough to eliminate the problems of international communication. Two unidirectional principles have prevailed in the past: What mattered was either to gain the ear of other people politically, economically, socioculturally or to learn from the achievement of others. Later, in the 20th century a third, bidirectional guiding principle was introduced namely the need to carry on bilateral talks with other people and thereby make international contacts possible.

In a world developing from mass communication to global communication, and becoming more complex in terms of technology and organization, translation is becoming increasingly important as a medium of international communication. Our era is an era of information technology. Some people have classified the 20th century as the century of translation (Kloepfer, 1967:7), the 21st century even more so.

It is very interesting that, in spite of all the creative productivity in this era, reproductive activities still remain tremendously more extensive than before. That is why today, to a greater extent, it is translation which determines how great an audience a book will have, and why the success of bestsellers is measured by the number of translations into other languages. The dissemination of the Bible, still the most frequently translated book is an evidence. Seen in this light, it is no exaggeration to say that the relationship between man and his environment is today affected largely in the form of a permanent communication process in which, in many spheres, information from foreign Countries plays almost as important a role as that from one's own Country. Translation plays a major role in all these. According to Störig,

Translating goes on at all circuit points in the communication network, in the international press agencies, in the various departments of newspapers and in radio and television stations, in diplomatic missions and the governments of the countries, in all international conferences; among border and customs authorities; in all export, and import firms in countless military administrative offices, be it those of the intelligence service or those of the international alliances; in film studies; in all international means of transportation just as translating is done by all those who... warmly receive [the] stream of foreigners in hotels and restaurants, on ships, in factories, at Universities or in the Family... (Störig, 21969:XI). The picture is very well painted by Störig and is endless. The question for us is, what do all these mean to decision makers in Nigeria? Do the generality of the people in Nigeria consider studying a language in the university worthwhile. We shall keep these questions in mind as we discuss multilingualism, translation, and their roles in Nigeria.

2. The Language Policy and language Experience In Nigeria.

In Nigeria, language polices have always existed in the National policy on Education. The policy has since recommended the use of indigenous languages in official capacities, if any of them successfully emerges as the official language.

The following are some of the implications of the latest policy on language. The languages are grouped under official, Nigerian and Foreign languages. Under official languages, English, designated (L₄) stands alone, while L₁ to L₃ designated Nigerian languages are classified as: mother tongue (L₁), languages of immediate community (L₂) and major Nigerian languages as (L₃) respectively. French and Arabic are classified as foreign languages and designated both as (L₅). English is to be compulsory from senior primary school, mother tongue in lower primary, language of immediate community from lower primary, while major Nigerian languages are optional. The Foreign languages are optional until Abacha's regime uplifted French in 1997 making it compulsory in junior secondary school realising its strength in ECOWAS and OAU. There is also provision for Nigerian children to learn one other Nigerian language other than mother tongue for Senior Secondary School Examination. We do not intend to go into the problems and vagueness already perceived and commented upon by many people regarding some of the statements of the language polices and their implementation. But suffice it to say that, just as many policies in Nigeria, the language policy is just on paper. Not much effort goes into implementation. Visits to Secondary Schools in Igbo states show that no effort is made at the teaching and learning of any other Nigerian language for WAEC other than Igbo. It is the same for other linguistic communities in Nigeria. Many Departments of Nigerian languages and linguistics in Nigerian Universities are there only for the language(s) of the vicinity where the Universities are located. The pluralisation of the Departments as that for Nigerian languages exists only in name. Efforts are not made to recruit teachers from other parts of Nigeria to teach other Nigerian languages in the Universities. The government is less concerned about implementation of policies and agreements made.

In the case of foreign languages, Nigerian Government, past and present rarely made room for the teaching of any other foreign languages, except French, Arabic is the language of Islamic religion and naturally learnt by Northern Nigerian Moslem pupils. Its foreign character is therefore relative.

In the 21st century, Nigeria "the giant of Africa" still in her honest governance, sends people to foreign missions in countries whose languages they neither speak nor understand. No Eastern or Western Country would do that with their foreign mission, with

the intelligence and diplomacy involved. Many graduates of foreign languages, like other graduates are either jobless or in employments that are irrelevant to their training. What a nation! Ekong and Achebe have been quoted, time without number in their explanation that, no one understands another whose language he does not speak or understand (*Achebe, 1975:48*), (*Ekong, 1979:4*). Foreign language training includes study of language, culture and history of the owners of the language. It should be a thing of shame for any ambassador to accept diplomatic mission to a Country whose language he does not speak or understand. Patriotism and national consciousness should involve employing people in areas where they are qualified, by their training and career preparation.

Where is Nigeria located in the globalization and information technology echelon? How much of the realities, recognized and presented by Störig as far back as 1969, as the circuit points in the communication network where translation goes on, have our decision makers given thought about in developing the language policies? Nigerians as a whole neglect the study of languages, both national and foreign. The choice to study a language as a discipline in the University means to Nigerians that one is less brilliant and has no other choice. One comes “down” to study English, Nigerian languages or foreign languages, if one fails to get admission to do law, and tries to change to law after using languages Departments to secure the admission for one year.

In the Guardian of 28th April, 1997 lecturers of German in Nigeria considered the shortsightedness of the Federal Government with regard to the rapid development and the needs of today’s information technology and advised Government to ensure the teaching of not only French, but also Russian, Spanish and Asian languages in Nigeria (*Oladipo: 97*). Many Nigerians are in Japan today doing their undergraduate and postgraduate studies because of the position of Japan today in technological advancement. Before taking off to go into their discipline, those Nigerians have to learn the Japanese language first. In the same Guardian Newspaper, of May 27 1999, Ezee Amazu, a linguist and proprietress of Easy language School in Lagos, lent support to the advice of Nigerian teachers of German where she said that foreign languages are imperative for Nigerians. Going further in her views she said,

For Nigeria to play her leadership role in Africa in general and West Africa in particular, Nigerians need to be proficient in international languages other than English... with the increasing globalisation..., nothing stops Nigerians from having working knowledge of a third or fourth international language... Democratization will result in influx of foreign investors which will make availability of foreign language experts necessary, courses in computer studies, bilingual/secretarial training and Internet café make foreign languages competence imperative.

To support her philosophy, Ezee offers French, Italian, Spanish, German, English, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba languages in her school.

At this juncture, let me share with my readers a personal experience of problems of incompetence in foreign languages. Often faced with the need to once in a while write papers in my teaching language for job satisfaction, I recently had the nastiest experience of it. With the recent information technology in vogue, which requires one to at times submit manuscripts in diskettes, I had an operator who type-sets very well but is knowledgeable only in English and mother-tongue do a paper for me. An eight paged manuscript took two weeks to type-set in ten working days. In the end, almost every word in the manuscript was erroneously spelled, and upwards of two lines of sentences were skipped here and there. An

attempt to proof-read the manuscript on the computer screen was halted, because the attempt to correct a certain letter of the alphabet in the foreign language resulted in the computer not being able to proceed with further commands. The deadline for the said paper was missed. The problem described above simply shows that, with lack of computer operators who have multilingual competence, foreign language teachers and scholars have in addition, to retrain as “*expert*” typists (anybody can type by picking the letters), to be able to cope with research, teaching and preparation of their manuscripts for publication.

Multilingualism and translation for science and domestic purposes

Already in 1996, Jumpelt realised the importance of foreign language experts for science when he says:

The perpetual expansion of science and technology into a conglomerate made up partly of giant research complexes rather widely dispersed from region to region has led to serious problems in international communication. UNESCO, for example has ascertained that 50% of all publications in natural sciences are not read by 50% of experts in a field because they lack the necessary knowledge of foreign languages (Jumpelt: 1961).

This means not only that important scientific information is not coming to the attention of those potentially interested (the most blatant example being the Sputnik shock of 1957, which could have been averted by a systematic analysis of Soviet technical literature in America), but also that science is involuntarily duplicating its efforts (scientific research already conducted is being conducted again, a fact leading to considerable misappropriation of scientific resources). The picture could be more blurred today, especially with respect to developing countries including Nigeria where foreign language study is relegated to the background. From the sixties to the eighties of the twentieth century, it was compulsory for the students of natural sciences in Nigerian Universities to take French or German as elective for graduation in their fields of study. Today, Foreign language is no longer a compulsory elective, with the result that there is a drop in the number of science students coming to enroll in French, German or Russian courses of Foreign Languages Department. I have had occasion to translate journal articles which though written in French and German, already contain good summaries of the findings in English. My clients never knew that all they needed were contained in the summaries. They could guess the chemical reactions from the compounds in the equation, and a smattering knowledge in the languages would have helped them understand the articles and findings without looking for a translator. Translation exercises carried out in different languages also showed that many Nigerian scientists claim original discoveries for works and findings accomplished in the U.S.A and other western countries thirty years and more ago. We can go on and on giving instances why knowledge of language other than mother tongue is very important. Nigeria of 21st century needs a foreign language policy that will make it imperative for our children to choose from among languages of the technologically advanced countries in their Secondary School. Learning one other Nigerian language other than mother tongue should be enforced in junior secondary school, because children learn languages relatively faster than adults.

4. Translation, World Literature and Nigerian Literature

It was George Mounin, the French translation theorist who said that translation involves the passage from one cultural world into another (Mounin, 1963: 222ff). The term culture is understood here as the whole way of life of a given speech community, including language, art, thought and belief system. There are different aims in translating. In ancient Roman times, the interest in translation became necessary as a result of cultural and power politics conditioned by Rome's relationship with Greece. Whereas, the first translations of Greek literature into Latin, for example, the translation of Euripides' tragedies by Ennius, or the translation of Greek comedies by Plautus and Terence, had been experiments in subservience" (*Friedrich, 1965:7*) to the original. The Romans, conscious of their military victory over Greece, very soon reversed the standards their method of translation of Greek literature, first and foremost into Latin, the language of the conqueror (the Romans), did a lot in terms of contribution to the history of Mankind. It (*Greek literature*) became the instrument of Education as a system of learning, because Education started first as philosophical discourse, which was inherited from the Greeks. Through Latin, the world of the Roman Empire gained access to ancient civilization. The philosophy of Education cannot be fully and successfully discussed without the mention of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and many other Greek thinkers. We read them in translations.

Translation permeates all spheres of intercultural relationship. Without translation, the globalization process which involves communication and information exchange process can never be a reality. For, how can people, so diverse, linguistically and otherwise and separated from one another be brought close together, without a means of communication available to all? The Christian world understands the message of the Bible, the most frequently translated literature, because it has been rendered in almost all written languages.

Writers in different spheres of knowledge, who have made great contributions to knowledge, find their way into other foreign cultures in the whole world where their propagated ideas are needed through the means of translation. Shakespeare has been translated into limitless number of languages of the world. Chinua Achebe has introduced the Igbo culture to different linguistic communities of the world. Soyinka has communicated Yoruba mythology to different peoples of the world through translation.

Between 1991 and 1994, Nigerian children and other West African children were made to read a German playwright in translation for the West African Examination Certificate. Brecht's *Good woman of Sezuwan* experienced a big extension of his audience in Nigeria. He had been read and dramatized before then in Universities in Nigeria in English and Theatre Arts Departments, as well as German language sections of foreign language Departments. But in English and Theatre Arts Departments, Brecht is received in English and not German. His play is probably introduced because of the theme of 'goodness' in it. Other messages, which the Nigerian audience receive in this play were discussed by this author in another paper (*Ibemesi: 1997*). People all over the world disseminate or gain information through translation, be it scientific, technological, economic, religious or political. The said German playwright has permeated other disciplines in Nigerian and other national academic institutions. For disciplines in social sciences, he is one of the key theoreticians discussed, because of his Marxist and socialist leaning which he carried into his theatrical theory and practice. He is hailed in many countries because of his use of theatre to fight for the downtrodden and the oppressed of the society. However many of these audiences only read him in translation or dramatized his plays in translation because,

either they have no competence in the German language, or they want more audience, and larger audience too, to get his message. His reception in theatre in Nigeria is such that people like Soyinka adapted his plays, and Bode Osanyin and theatre scholars of Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria claim to be working under his influence (Ihekweazu: 1983). Instances are limitless. But suffice it to say that there are gains in multilingualism and translation, and Nigeria should reap from the fruits her characteristic as a multilingual nation.

Concluding Remarks and Suggestions.

Nigeria should regard as a source of strength, the invaluable asset, multilingualism, the ability to speak several or many languages. Backed up with good language policy, Nigeria will overcome many problems that some Nigerians believe to be associated with having many languages. The problem is that the policy makers are myopic when it concerns policies on languages. Implementation of policies is also a serious problem, as Nigerian Governments easily make policies on languages. Implementation of policies but do not ensure their implementation.

In the words of Romanus Egudu, language endows its original speakers with such identity as is inseparable from their culture and essential nationality (*Egudu, 1999:1*). Hamp according to Egudu, says that the vocabulary of a given speech-community is in some sense a reflection of its culture (*Hamp, 348*) and quoting Whorf; he believes that the way in which a community views the world around it, its 'Weltanschauung' is already shaped by the structure of its language, which may even lead to overt expression in its habitual modes of behaviour (*Egudu: 1*). If the above views are true, it means exactly that Nigeria is rich in cultures and world views (*Weltanschauung*). The strength of America today is in her multiplicity in racial and other human characteristics, which she recognizes and harnesses. Nigeria's strength lies also in her multiplicity in human resources, but she has not started harnessing these multiple cultural and linguistic resources, rather she indulges in ethnic and religious conflicts which blind her vision on what to do with her wealth. Representations in the federal character in all spheres of Nigerian life and politics have not reflected this multiplicity.

What to do: Before giving my suggestions, I will start by commending the effort of a scholar like Clara Ikekeonwu who, because she was born, bred, and schooled Yorubaland in Nigeria has undertaken to translate the classic Igbo novel *Omenuko* into Yoruba language. A novel written in Igbo language has experienced an expanded audience among the Yorubas because of Ikekeonwu's rendering of it into Yoruba. The Igbo, often referred to as "the Jews of Africa", are found in every nook and corner of Nigeria and all over the world. Many of these Igbo 'en route' have fantastic language aptitude and thus speak the language of other parts of Nigeria where they seek greener pastures. In the same vein, some other Nigerians live in other linguistic frontiers other than theirs.

With respect to Foreign languages in Nigeria, we need to open up our Foreign language policies. The moment the Nigerian government makes it a policy that foreign diplomats must be competent in at least one other Foreign language than English, and sends only those who can communicate in the language of their host countries as ambassadors, then we would realize that Nigeria has come of age to participate in the intercultural diet of information technology and globalization process. Anything short of recognizing foreign language experts in diplomatic services remains a deceit by the Nigerian Government. No Country worth its salt can still afford to depend on Foreign interpreters in international

communication in this new millennium. Translation is also suggested to be done from foreign language to Nigerian indigenous languages and vice versa. On this note, the effort of Eze, a social anthropologist who recently translated a French play by Molière into Igbo is highly commendable as exemplary. Eze sees some similarities in the thinking of the French people in Molière's 17th century French, and Nigerian contemporary society. In undertaking the translation, he confirms Ihekweazu's views on the influence of writers and poets, where she says, similarities in the themes and structures in literature arise because of the relatedness of socio-economic conditions rather than individual characteristics (Ihekweazu, 1981:52).

Lastly, translation is encouraged in schools as a way of facilitating learning in foreign languages. This is the type of translation that Vinay and Darbelnet refer to as pedagogic translation (*traduction scolaire*) (Vinay and Darbelnet, 1958:24). Darbelnet and Vinay are of the view that this type of translation will enable the teacher of foreign language ascertain if the students have assimilated the vocabulary of Foreign language, to be able to use them to articulate sensibly. There certainly are lots of gains in translation.

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