

Language Policy and Educational Development in Africa: The Case of Nigeria

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Abstract: The paper examines elements affecting language policy and planning, and their impact on education in Africa, with a focus on Nigeria. It starts by considering the classification of the linguistic diversity in Africa and the relationship between the indigenous languages as well as the exoglossic languages constituting the umbilical cord between Africa and Europe. We then move to a study of the complex linguistic situation in Nigeria. With an estimated population of over 140 million and more than 500 languages, Nigeria is the largest nation in sub-Saharan Africa and host to 25% of the subcontinent's population. It is a country with one of the highest incidences of linguistic diversity although its languages have unequal status and over 35% of the population is illiterate despite the language and education policies in place. The official indigenous languages and other lingua franca and their relationship with the official foreign languages are reviewed. Some policy statements are considered with regard to the impact on minority languages in the educational domain.

Key words: language policy, multilingualism, Africa, mother tongue, language education

1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide an assessment of the linguistic diversity in the Sub-Saharan African continent and to look at some of the ways that educational disadvantages could be challenged. The continent has a large number of languages, over 2,110, equivalent to 30.5% of the world's linguistic heritage (6,909 living languages) (ethnologue 2009, online).

Several of the African languages communicate over long distances and about a hundred of them are widely used for inter-ethnic communication. Most African languages are alive and well linguistically speaking, and many smaller ones with fewer than 50,000 speakers, are quite stable and do not show reduction in number of speakers.

A number of African languages now have a stronger socio-political standing than they did two decades ago and these languages (Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo in Nigeria, Setswana in Botswana, Kishwaili in Tanzania and Kenya, Wolof in Senegal, Bambara in Mali, and Bamileke in Ivory Coast amongst others) have gained ground against the exogenous languages (the European official languages e.g. English and French). This success is due to the great awareness through research and enlightenment going on in Africa, and to the UNESCO funding facilities and the interest of the world linguists and social-scientists in the African linguistic situation.

Another main reason for the strength of most of the African languages is that, unlike some other parts of the world e.g. Latin America, North America/USA, in Africa, the former colonial languages are not a major factor in language loss. Colonisation has not

led to the marginalisation of the native population as it has in the Americas, and people speaking endangered languages in Africa are not necessarily worse off economically compared to their neighbours speaking ‘healthier’ languages.

In most African states, there is the mother tongue, which is the medium of informal education in the home and of socialization processes among families. There are also the languages of the immediate or wider community which serve as local or regional lingua franca and are therefore mastered by every member of the group. In the majority of African states the colonial language (English, French, Spanish or Portuguese) is the official language but this has little impact on day-to-day communicative situations.

2 Linguistic diversity in Africa

The standard classification used for African languages is based on Greenberg (1963), Grimes (2000) and recent contributions from linguists such as Williamson and Blench, Bender (2000), Hayward (2000), Hodge (2001), Vossen and Tom (2000). African languages are classified into four major linguistic families or phyla: Afro-asiatic, Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Congo and Khoisan (cf. Table 1 and Map 1)

Table 1: African language family

| Language Group | No. of languages | Geographical spread | No. of speakers |
|----------------|------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Afro-asiatic | 200 | North Africa to the Horn of Africa | 250+ million |
| Nilo-Saharan | 140 | Sudan and Chad | 11 million |
| Niger-Congo | 1000 | West, Central & Southeast Africa | 200 million |
| Khoisan | 30 | Deserts of Namibia and Botswana | data not available |

Source: www.ethnologue.com

Map 1: Language Groupings in Africa



3 Languages and education development in Africa

The choice of languages for education in Africa has been based on a number of factors as outlined below.

3.1 Historical experience of colonialism

Most African countries were colonised from the middle of the nineteenth century to the 1960's. Each colonial power imposed its own language on the African states according to their colonial ambitions. Imperial educational and colonial policies often determined a) the level of entrenchment of the colonial language and, b) the extent to which indigenous languages were tolerated and promoted in the educational system. One can summarize the colonial legacy in education in Africa as follows:

- States colonised by France were taught the French language at all levels, i.e. it was a total immersion into the French system;
- States colonised by the Spanish and the Portuguese had a similar experience;
- In countries colonised by the British the use of indigenous languages was tolerated in the first years of formal education whilst English language was encouraged within higher education.

These colonial experiences had an indelible impact on the colonies, and most of them went on to adopt the colonial master's language after their independence.

3.2 Political evolution after the attainment of independence;

After independence, educational reform was very high on the agenda of most African states. There was a concern for increased access to formal education, a greater need to adapt formal education to national realities and also a desire to promote indigenous languages. Efforts were made in this direction via:

- Campaign for mother tongue education;
- Decolonising education;
- Education for "African renaissance"

It was a period during which effort was made to get African countries to accept that mother tongue should be developed for educational purposes. It was also a period of bold initiatives with innovative decisions involving the choice of national languages and their full development for use in basic education and literacy. This period also witnessed initiatives aimed at pushing forward the gains of the colonial period, as exemplified in the (City of) Ife Six Year Primary Project in Nigeria (Adegbija, 2004: 220-223).

3.3 Sociolinguistic situation and attitude towards indigenous languages

Most African countries are known to be multilingual. It is a common situation in Africa that the less multilingual a country is the easier it is to develop a national language policy, and the quicker it is to implement it. The few monolingual or bilingual countries in Africa, such as Somalia, Burundi, Rwanda, have found it relatively easy to promote either a single or a few interrelated languages to national status within education. The extent to which each country has been able to apply these national languages into

secondary, scientific, technical and higher education, has depended on the level of political will, the number of languages, and the degree of the national integrity. This is a very sensitive process, as conflicts have sprung up among groups of different linguistic backgrounds. Adoption by imposition of a minority language as an official or as a language of literacy will always create suspicion and rebellion among other linguistic groups.

3.4 Influence of linguistic and educational lobbies and organisations

With the attainment of independence came the need to adapt every educational endeavour to African conditions. Attempts were made in the area of language education to develop orthographies and to develop manuals for formal education and literacy. Departments of African languages sprung up in different parts of African institutions to support the development and spread of indigenous languages. The early independence days also coincided with the beginning of widespread use of indigenous languages in the media (radio broadcasting, newspapers, etc.) which helped to enlarge the “intellectual horizon” of African languages. The period also witnessed the creation of numerous African language interest groups or communities, which went on to become professional pressure groups to defend the cause of different African languages.

4 Case Study: Nigeria

Map 2: Nigeria



Source: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/cia-maps-publications>

Nigeria is situated on the west coast of Africa and covers an area of 923,768 square kilometres, over three times the size of Great Britain (cf. Map 2). Nigeria is politically composed of 36 states, and Abuja is the Federal Capital Territory. It is also one of the countries with the highest linguistic diversity, although these languages have unequal official and educational status. Almost 45% of Nigerians are illiterate, due in large part to the poor state of the educational system and the ineffectiveness of the national language policy.

4.1 Socio-ethnic and linguistic groupings

Nigeria was formed as a united territory by British colonial forces in 1914, with artificially created borders ‘arbitrarily’ including certain ethnic groups while dividing others with neighbouring states. Its complex ethno-linguistic situation in many ways is an example of problems faced by many developing states in Africa with regard to making national language policy and planning decisions.

The country has 141,356,000 habitants and over 527 languages, of which 514 are living languages, two are ‘second languages’ without mother tongue speakers, and eleven have no known speakers (Lewis, 2009). Nigeria is the largest nation in sub-Saharan Africa, containing approximately 25% of the subcontinent’s population. Nigeria’s many languages are spread broadly throughout the country’s thirty-six states, varying considerably in number of speakers, with three particular ethno-linguistic groups making up over half of the total population.

The three major indigenous or endoglossic languages dominating the Nigerian linguistic landscape (putting aside English for the time being) are: Hausa-Fulani spoken in the north as a first language by 20% of the population; Yoruba in the west spoken by 25%; and Igbo in the east, spoken by 20% of Nigerians. The remaining 35% are speakers of the so-called ‘minority’ languages. (cf. Table 2)

Table 2: Classification of the major Nigerian language families

| Languages | Phylum ¹ | % of total population | No. of speakers |
|----------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| Hausa-Fulani | Afro-asiatic | 20% | 28m |
| Yoruba | Nilo-Saharan | 25% | 35m |
| Igbo | Niger-Congo | 20% | 28m |
| Other ‘minority’ languages | Diverse | 35% | 49m |

The foreign or exoglossic languages in evidence in Nigeria are English, Arabic and French, spoken by 30%, 15% and 5-10% of the population respectively. Other exoglossic languages (e.g. German, Italian, and Russian) have a minimal presence as they are mainly used in embassies and in families of embassy employees, among a few individuals, in universities classrooms and among modern foreign languages departments’ staff. The third type consists of the Pidgin varieties of languages, the most dominant being the largely English-based Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) (Kaplan and Baldauf, 2007: 193).

Nigeria’s linguistic complexity manifests itself firstly by the existence of such a large number of languages within one country, and secondly by the present state of multilingualism, and its implications for development and education. Three out of four language phyla to which African languages are classified are represented in Nigeria.

¹ Phylum: A large division of possibly genetically related families of languages (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/phylum>)

Linguistic diversity in Nigeria has resulted in widespread bilingualism and multilingualism. Many people in Nigeria speak at least one language in addition to their mother tongue, and some speak as many as five languages. Code-switching and code-mixing are common in Nigerian bilinguals and there is a favourable attitude to multilingualism. A noticeable feature of Nigeria's language-planning model is the adoption of a system of stratified rationalization, whereby one or more majority languages are accorded special status at federal, regional, state, and local levels. At the same time, the right of other languages to exist and be developed is also respected.

4.2 Administration and management of the education system

The management of education in Nigeria is dictated by the country's political structure, based on federalism. The basic policy of education with regard to structure, curriculum and school year is centrally determined, while the Federal Ministry of Education is charged with the responsibility of harmonizing educational policies and procedures of all the states of the Federation through the National Council of Education. Other areas of education delivery are modified to suit local requirements.

4.2.1 Language policy and educational challenges

The two documents currently existing in Nigeria that include policy statements on languages are: (1) the National Constitution (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999) and (2) the National Policy on Education (NPE) (*ibid*, 2004). The prescribed national policy on languages within the NPE recognises the multifaceted dimensions of the country, and tries to capture the multi-ethnic and multilingual goals as follows:

1. The mother-tongue and/or other language of the immediate community are to be used as the language of initial literacy at the pre-primary and primary levels as well as in adult/non-formal education
2. The three major indigenous languages (cf. Table 2) are to be used as the languages of national culture and integration at L2
3. English, as the official language, is the language of formal literacy, the bureaucracy, secondary and higher education, the law courts and of international communication.
4. Selected extra exoglossic languages, especially French and Arabic, are the languages of international communication and discourse.

Although it is not explicit within the NPE, Emenanjo (online) suggests in terms of unstated policy that the NPE policy on languages:

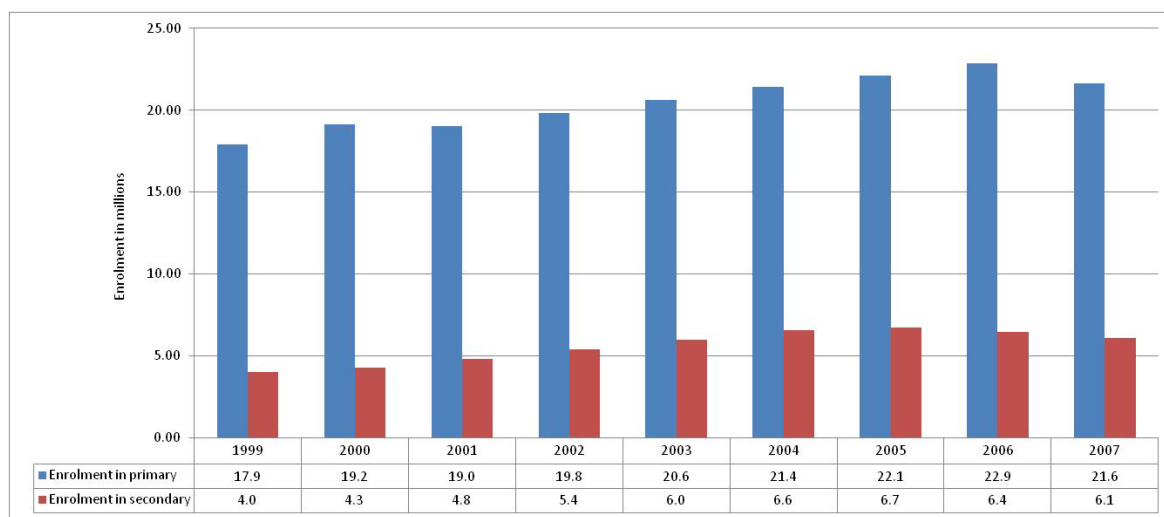
- Advocates multilingualism as the national goal
- Recognises English as the official language in administrative matters and all tiers of formal education
- Considers the three major indigenous languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) as potential national languages which are to be developed and used as LO and L2 throughout the formal education system.
- Recognises all Nigerian languages as meaningful media of instruction, including in lifelong and other non-formal education

These sections of the (NPE) policy can be summarised as follows:

- Pre-primary (age 3-5) instruction should be in the mother tongue or language of the immediate community;
- At the primary level, instruction should initially be in the mother tongue or language of the immediate community, and later in English;
- At secondary school/higher education level one of the three major languages, as well as the language of the community, should be taught; another Nigerian language is also to be included and taught as a core subject;
- Departments of African languages of Nigerian universities are to encourage indigenous languages to promote cultural diversity and multilingualism.

However, as can be seen from Table 3, the Nigerian education system has difficulties in retaining pupils beyond the primary school age.

Table 3: Comparison of enrolment numbers at primary and secondary schools in Nigeria 1997-2007



Notes:

1. Data covers public and private schools
2. All programmes Secondary data 1999 to 2005 inclusive is UIS estimation
3. Primary 2003 data is UIS estimation

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics

4.3 Negative impacts of the National Policy on educational development

In Nigeria, like most African countries, a high degree of multilingualism exists. However, few if any, detailed studies have been conducted. The multilingual nature of the society does not permit the use of a single indigenous language in the government or in education, and any attempt to do so will certainly be met with resistance. There are some questions arising from the explicit language policy statements of the NPE:

- If the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community is considered a crucial medium for achieving initial and permanent literacy and numeracy, why should it be only used at the pre-primary phase, and not throughout the whole of primary education?

- What is the relationship between mother tongue and English?
- Why should there be a changeover from mother tongue to English only after three years of pre-primary education?
- Might the transition create a “psychological gap detrimental to all the cognitive maturation and intellectual development of the child” (Chumbow: 1985)

The policy also stipulates that all the educational planning and program should be implemented when economically feasible, and as a result in most parts of the country full implementation is yet to be achieved. Implementation of the various aspects of the policy is to be accomplished through the development of indigenous languages, by creating orthographies and dictionaries, and writing of primers and other textbooks.

Given that there are over 20 standardised and codified languages in Nigeria, how might all of these be accommodated according to the policy described without simultaneously providing adequate teaching and learning resources, funding and qualified teachers to teach them to the 140 million inhabitants?

With regard to the above, it is regrettable that there has been no funding to date for linguistic projects dealing with the issues outlined. If the policy has to fulfil its aims of maintaining a national unity, reassuring an effective and grounded education for all, and maintaining the national independence, it has to have sound financial resources to enable rigorous implementation. By contrast, English, as an official language, is being accorded an ‘aura’ of superiority over the indigenous languages in most domains of Nigerian society. Yet this is contradictory to the main goals of the policy itself. The promotion of indigenous languages in the country is not backed by sufficient resources, such as providing more qualified teachers, nor is it put into practice by according these languages more air-time in the electronic media or more space in the print media.

5 Discussion of Findings

As argued earlier by Bamgbose (1991:111) language planning and language education policies in Africa are still largely characterized by numerous problems including vagueness, fluctuation, avoidance, arbitrariness and declaration without implementation. Arguably, many of the Nigerian problems with regard to policy and educational development are replicated elsewhere on the continent.

Most observers who have looked at the issue of language policy in Africa agree that there is a big gap between intended policy and outcome. Arguably problem of such magnitude can only be rectified with a strong political will. The retention of the dominant role of English language in all domains and the recent adoption of the French language as second official language is likely to impact negatively on the development of Nigeria’s indigenous languages. The situation might also lead to linguistic ‘under-nourishment’ i.e. impoverished knowledge of both English and mother-tongues.

The favourable attitude of the population towards English due to the power, influence, and legitimacy associated with the language arguably works to the disadvantage of the

indigenous languages. Although many Nigerians feel it is now time for an indigenous language to take on the role of lingua franca, there is no ethnically neutral language able to assume this mantle. English, therefore, continues to function as the major language of communication.

NPE, despite its widespread use, has no official recognition and for the most part is regarded by the ruling and educated elite as a bastardized form of English. Its increasing popularity in towns and cities and especially on university campuses suggests that its status might change in the near future. In order to turn the current scenario around the following should be considered:

- Viable and more democratically established language policies are required. Such policies would re-focus the indigenous languages into the central area of the social life of the majorities, and serve as vehicle for their empowerment with knowledge, modern science and technology. To do we need to identify speech forms that share high degrees of mutual intelligibility and thus could be regarded as dialects of one language, which would in turn make it possible to develop literatures for members of these speech communities.
- Reliable, transparent, basic language planning model is arguably preferable to copying foreign policy, or getting the policy drafted outside the target environment (Kaplan, Baldauf: 1997:106-7). This in turn requires a reliable population census and the creation of practicable policy goals.
- Studies dealing with sociolinguistics, multilingualism, population studies, descriptive and comparative/historical work should constitute major areas for linguistic research in Africa, specifically in Nigeria in the future.

In Nigeria, the endeavour to promote the three indigenous languages across the nation through the educational system will require very serious long-term commitment from the government in the form of major financial support for teacher-training, the creation of teaching materials, and careful placement of teachers in strategic locations. Without such planning resources, the desired spread of these languages will simply fail to occur, as can be seen from the generally poor results that the mother-tongue education policy has produced so far. Any promotion of these languages to national official status on a par with or even replacing English in all official and formal domains would similarly need a massive, sustained investment of government funds, as evidenced by countries such as Canada, Singapore, and Switzerland where genuine official multilingualism is being maintained. If these linguistic problems are not addressed by means of a major policy and attitudinal shift in the near future, assisted by experts in the field, language death will be the harsh reality facing a number of Nigeria's minority languages.

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