

**CHOICE OF LINGUA-FRANCA IN A MULTI-LANGUA SOCIETY LIKE NIGERIA (A STUDY OF AWKA NORTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA**

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**Abstract**

*A lingua franca is a language prescribed by law and enforced on the citizens of the land for purposes of communication, learning, government and the law. This paper is on the Choice of Lingua franca in a multi-Lingual society like Nigeria. Nigeria has been faced with the problem of being unable to select a lingua franca due to the multiplicity of languages. The paper seeks to address the question associated with the choice of a lingua franca and also find out the extent the English language has influenced the development of the Nigeria indigenous language. The research instrument is a structured questionnaire which was distributed among one hundred and sixty (160) samples. Part four focuses on the analysis of data, from which it was found out that the English language has a very powerful influence over the Nigeria indigenous languages. The paper recommend that Government should set up a large and professional language centre instead of a largely administrative set up that now exists as a unit of education. The Government should set up linguistic departments in different higher institutions where Nigerian languages would be given adequate attention.*

**Keywords;** lingua –franca, languages, indigenous language, and Government

**Introduction**

Language permeates our lives from birth to death. It is the medium by which we establish and experience our most important human relationship. Language also serves as an essential tool for conducting the most mundane transactions of our daily lives. In poetry, ritual song, folklore, tales, drama and ceremony, language has often provided a focus for our deepest and aesthetic work including mathematics. Even in solitude, we live within the medium of language, for habitually, a great many of our thoughts come into awareness as words and sentences. "Habitual" is a key word here, for language is so intricately a part of the habit of our daily lives that we rarely notice it all. We pay our attention to what is said but rarely wonder how language enables us to say it. Only when communication breaks down, perhaps, do we become aware of the relevance of language.

The word "language" is used in modern times not only for natural languages like Igbo, Yoruba, Housa, Edo, English or French, but also for a variety of other systems of communication, notation or calculation to meet particular needs, for example, an artificial language, Esperanto was invented in the late 19 th century, for international communication and trade. Quite recently, an attempt was made to reconstruct a common language for Nigeria which the inventors called (WAZOBIA) we therefore find that artificial and non - natural languages are limited in vocabulary, function, structure and range of application.

We equally come across such terms like sign language, body language, language of bees, and the like. However we do not regard these as language because in these cases, language is used metaphorically. It has not been easy to come up with a perfect, generally agreed definition of language. Here, we shall be looking at the different definitions of language proffered by linguists and scholars with a view of enabling us see not only the similarities and differences, but also the highly complex nature of language.

Sapir (1921:8) defines language as purely human and non - instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols. In this definition, the terms, ideas, emotion and desires are vague because whichever way we construct them, we find that there is much that is communicated by language that is not covered by them. Language is not limited only to communicating

ideas and emotions, for example the term idea is imprecise as there are man produced systems that do in fact communicate, which we do not necessarily regard as language such as gesture, eye — gaze, and postures. So, whether language is purely human and non — instinctive is still an open question.

A lingua franca furthermore, could be referred to as a language prescribed by law and enforced on the citizens of the land for purposes of communication, learning, government and the law.

Nigeria as multi-ethnic country has many languages, this obviously hinders communication, and now, some people advocate that Nigeria should have an indigenous language or lingua franca. But it is unfortunate that there have been a lot of problems to agitate for. A lingua franca is an internal or international language adopted by people for various communications needs. It is usually a by-product of ethnic rivalries and multiplicity of language as well as political incompatibility of people with international lingua franca.

However, a situation where the English language can be retained as a functional lingua franca will be appreciated since the choice of another national language may breed social and economic chaos as we know that English is used virtually in all our communication. It is good to note that the most important role of an indigenous lingua franca is an ideological one. No matter how we disguise our arguments in favour of an indigenous lingua franca, the basic argument must be nationalistic and we cannot shy away from it, our identity card or passport to our independent culture is our mother tongue. As soon as we take away our mother tongue, we become captives, no longer free, and in other hand linguistically colonized.

A lingua franca is to a great extent an instrument of love, peace and unity. When one understands what a person is saying, he is naturally a more sympathetic listener; no doubt, some Hausa beggars are sometimes turned away ungenerously by some Efik speaking people who do not understand the fine prayers the beggars are uttering in Hausa language.

### **Study Problem**

To some Nigerians, it is axiomatic that the country Nigeria has a national language question. To some Nigerians, this is by no means obvious and if asked to suggest a solution, they would probably first want to know what the question was; their uncertainty might be traceable to the fact that there is not one question but a cluster of inter-related others.

Firstly, lying fairly near the pole of least controversy is the question as to whether English language should be officially promoted and multilingualism made a target of educational policy.

Second, and nearer to the other extreme pole of greatest controversy, there is the question as to whether or not certain languages should be given prominence than others.

Third, is the question as to whether some of Nigerians indigenous languages might, or should, be regarded as "National languages" and if so which ones.? This question often narrows down to the question of choosing just one language as the national language.

This suggests that a multilingual community is not necessary an ethnically mixed community.

- **Language used in Ministries**

He argues that what influences language choice most in this and other situations is the availability of language. The same person, in the course of the day's official activities may use his mother tongue Hausa, Pidgin English or Standard English, but records are consistently kept in English.

- **Market Place**

He states that apart from the modern Jos market and the township market, there are many conventional open-air markets.

The petty traders in these markets demonstrates impressive language skills because, they daily some in contact with people with different language backgrounds. He points out that generally, the pattern of language use in order of frequency is Hausa, Pidgin and mother tongue. That it is only on rear occasions that people use Standard English.

- **Mass Media**

He points out here that, the state government newspaper, the Nigerian Standard newspaper is published in English, the Hausa newspaper, Dan Adam, does not seem to have off successfully.

- **Educational Institutions**

He observed that many parents speak English to their children at home. And that is the major reason why they send their children to different level of education in order to improve their standard. Adekunle concludes that, the realities of language use as seen in Jos area in 1985 is that the English language has become a very significant segment of the communication network in the Nigerian multilingua community. In support of this, I want to say that is not far from the truth, in other words, it is true. Sybil James in 1979 has noted that one can hardly discuss language activity without communicating and the circumstances that give rise to the

- Communication.

In the language of transaction, especially in market situation in Nigeria, there is the need to undertake and investigate into the discourse of buying and selling as to enable us discover the strategies that mark the discourse out as functional one. The Roles of English in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Since the formation of the national language policy, more than a decade ago, English has remained the official language in Nigeria. None of the three major languages has so far emerged as the dominant official language of the country. None has been sufficiently developed to carry the burden of scientific, and technological education in Nigeria.

The difficulty encountered in concerning and translating scientific terms into the mother tongue undermines the use of the mother tongue as the language of education at the secondary school level and beyond. Even though the teachings of a second indigenous language have been going on since the 1980's, no significant impact has actually been made or observed in this regard. For instance, it is difficult to find an Hausa pupil speak Igbo or Yoruba land vice versa as a result of the teaching and learning of these languages in the secondary school as stipulated by the language policy. At best, the pupil learns these languages for purpose of passing examination and not necessary to become bilingual in the local languages.

Trained teachers and text books in these major languages are still in very short supply and these constitute serious constraints in the realization of the objective of the language policy. In spite of effort to enforce mother tongue, education in the pre-primary and the primary schools, the practice in most private Nursery and Primary institutions is the use of English as the medium of instruction.

Furthermore most educated families in Nigeria use English at home and ensure that the first language of the child is English. The argument is premised on the fact that English is the language of education and text books are written in English, therefore early exposure of the child to English language ensures better communicative compliance in the language in formal education. A situation, where a credit pass in the senior secondary school certificate (SSCE) and general certificate of education continues to be pre-requisites for university admission, further lends credence to the indigenous language.

A notable factor militating against the emergence of an indigenous lingua franca is the effect the language policy has on the minority ethnic groups who feel marginalized by the adoption of the three major languages.

In a project carried out in Calabar by Emenyeonu and Nta (1990:11) they observed that: An overwhelming number of the sample via ethnic dominations that may result from the choice of a local lingua franca. Nigerians reject the categorization of Nigerian languages..... a position which gives credit to their degree of discernment. No wonder Ogu (1992:94) concludes that:

As long as Nigerians from the other ethnic groups feel marginalized by the adoption of English  
So long will a lingua franca elude us and so long will English continue to gain dormancy.

Nigeria may be constrained to continue to live this colonial vestige. English since most of the attempts at fashioning out an indigenous lingua franca have proved abortive. The case of the Esperanto, WAZOBIA experiment and the possible adoption of Swahili or pidgin as a lingua franca are eloquent testimonies of these failed attempts. The fact that all other alternatives have been taught with economic, social and political problems which makes it imperative for English to continue to render this linguistic service to the Nigeria nation. It will be pertinent at this juncture to recall Emenyeonu's assertion that: It seems safer to live with English, its colonial reminiscence notwithstanding that to de live into the languages in the country

(Emenyeonu's 1985:35) As we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is quite obvious that English languages is at the head of affairs and will continue to enjoy a pride of place in the linguistic typology of the country. However, as a second weight of the Nigerian experience, it must be domesticated to suit its local environment, although not at the expense of international intelligibility.

This is the point Achebe articulates when he asserts that:

The English will be able to carry the weight of any African experience. But it will have to be new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit it new African surroundings (Achebe 1966: 18)

In using the English language therefore, attempt must be made to insist on native speaker competence. For our people, we must also recognize and tolerate a variety of the languages, which is largely a Nigerian variety.

The Language Situation in Nigeria

It has been a difficult task for linguists and language specialists to state convincingly the exact number of languages in Nigeria. Though estimates have been made, which range from 200 to over 400 Languages. The reasons for the uncertainty are many.

First, research into the problem has not been adequately co-ordinate while a few people have shown interest in the project, relevant authority such as Federal, State and Local Governments agencies and research establishments have been rather lukewarm about it, even when the National Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN), specific publishers and individuals encourage researchers that should lead to an answer on this, such efforts are not regularly supported through findings.

Nevertheless, when we consider the size of Nigeria and the fact that in some parts (such as the upper section of Cross River state) there are numerous separated languages spoken by villages that are otherwise very close to each other. We can see that some of the indications about the number of languages in Nigeria have tended to be conservative. For instance, Elugbe (1990:17) puts the figure (in a note) at 513. One tends to be conservative, appeals to render as a possible minimum. At the group and individual levels, there are Nigerians who speak as many of they have need for. There are others who are bilingual. They speak their mother tongue and other languages.

Problems Caused by the Language Situation in Nigeria

The language situation in Nigeria as sketched above illustrates that the majority of Nigerians speak their indigenous language and at least one other language for those who have learnt it. That other language is most probably English, since English is the language of instruction in a large number of Nigerian schools. This relates to the generally recognized global importance of English, but at the same time this situation makes it difficult for Nigerians to evolve an indigenous lingua franca for the nation.

The issue of a lingua franca has been a matter of considerable discussion among linguists, language specialists and mature politicians while the great majority would favour the evolution and indeed a speedy emergence of a lingua franca for Nigeria, there is an apparent general problem of working towards this goal. However, in recent study, a proposal referred to as the progressive trilingual approach has been made. The summary of this approach is the advocacy of patience, allowing each Nigerian to learn, any language other than his own. Within a specific count would be taken to confirm the language which the majority of Nigerians have learnt. Incentives proposed in the source above would then be implemented. This idea would tackle the problem of a lingua franca while retaining English for specific national and international intercourse. It is therefore our hope that in our lifetime, Nigerians will evolve a lingua franca for the nation.

Another problem posed by the language situation in Nigeria is that of disunity. Speaking within individual Nigeria language tends to see each other as relations and friends particularly outside economic

and material issues. They tend to consider others as "foreigners" within the same country. Also each Nigerian linguistic group tends to see itself as being superior to others. This happens sometimes even with those who are supposed to recognize the equality and adequacy of all natural language namely that there are no inferior and no superior languages in strict linguistic terms. Even though we must not forget that Nigeria is a very large country, (the giant of Africa) language situation stands in the way of cross-cultural integration and harmony. Again, it is important to remember that the major group languages Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba have had lots of developed literature and creative writing. The minor group language cannot claim so much accomplishment in the regard. Yet it is true that creative endeavors in Nigeria languages do not necessarily depend on the relative population of the speakers. They depend on the individuals who use the language.

In addition to disunity, the language situation also discourages the development of indigenous language. In spite of the efforts of the National Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) earlier mentioned, there are still the problems of funding and of a large-scale development. The problems indicated here should not, however, cause us to forget that the

multilingual position of Nigeria has born advantages too first, it encourages competition in various sphere of national development i.e. in a way, enhanced through healthy national competition, as no linguistic group wants to be left behind.

Second the situation leads to self determination as shown by the outcome of state creation, for instance, and the provision of specific criteria for the "sharing" of our natural wealth.

Finally, one may add that the language situation in Nigeria is itself an important stimulus for research for instance scholars have asked lots of questions

- i. How did the various ethnic groups in Nigeria originate?
- ii. What factors constitute our bases for remaining one nation state?
- iii. What is the best national language policy for Nigeria?

### **English in the Nigerian Situation**

English has been called different things at different times in Nigeria. It has been described as a foreign language, a second language and a lingual Franca, yet each of these terms is inadequate when the practical role of English is considered in Nigeria.

Achebe maintains that English is the one central language that enjoys nationwide currency. In government circles, English is referred to as the official language of communication, administration and instruction. This imprecise and often ambivalent definition of English creates problems for the language teacher. It leads to ambiguous attitude in the teachers as well as the learners towards the language. It also leads to confusion in pedagogical approaches to English as a subject and in language learning and teaching in

Nigeria, no variably results in half-measures taken to solve the problems of English language learning and teaching in Nigeria no matter how profound the analysis of such problem may be.

The Federal Government of Nigeria is committed to a program to eradicate mass illiteracy in the country. Many scholars have argued persuasively that this goal can be more easily achieved if the mother tongue medium instead of the multilingual policy is adopted in language education.

In conclusion, the form and states of English in Nigeria is as a result of the contact between English and Nigeria language in the socio cultural and political situation.

#### **Presentation Data and Analysis**

Table 1 Question 2

Which of the classes do you belong to?

Opinions	Upper class	Middle class	Total
Frequency	70	90	160
Percentage	44	56	100%

The tables above shows, which class the respondents tested, belong to. The number of people that belong to the upper class is 70 (44%), while that of the middle class is 90 (56%).

Table 2 -Question 3  
Which of the languages do you speak?

Opinions	Igbo	Yoruba	Hausa	English	Others	Total
Frequency	40	30	20	60	10	160
Percentage	25%	19	13	38	6	100%

The table above shows that the language spoken most by the respondents is English language. And the number is 60 (38%).

Table 3 —Question 4

Which languages do you speak at home?

Opinion	Igbo	Yoruba	Hausa	English	Others	Total
Frequency	47	20	23	57	13	160
Percentage	29	13	14	36	8	100%

From the above table we notice that the language most people (respondents) speak is English, which is 57 (36%).

Table 4 - Question 5  
Do you speak English fluently?

Opinion	Yes	No	Total
Frequency	95	65	160
Percentage	59	41	100%

A close look at the above table shows that the number of people or respondents who speak English fluently is more than the number of those who do not. And it is represented by 95 (59%).

Table 5 - Question 6  
Do you switch from English to any other languages in the house?

Opinion	Yes	No	Total
Frequency	71	89	160
Percentage	44	56	100%

Table 5 above shows how often people or the respondents code - switch in their conversation in their houses. Those who code - switch are less in number than those who do not code - switch. The number is 71 (44%), and (56%) respectively.

Table 6 - Question 7

Which of the languages eases communication and enhances social interaction for you?

Opinion	Igbo	Yoruba	Hausa	English	Others	Total
Frequency	28	25	25	67	15	160
Percentage	18	16	16		9	100%

From the above table, it is observed that English language eases communication and enhances social interaction. This is represented by 67 (42%).

Table 7 - Question 8

Do you prefer English to any of the other language?

Opinion	Yes	No	Total
Frequency	130	30	160
Percentages	81	19	100%

The above table discloses that, out of 160 population tested, 130 (81%) prefer English to any other language while 30 (19%) says no.

Below here, is the analysis of question 9 that cannot be tabulated. Explain your reason (In relation to Question 8).

The analysis is that, the number of respondents, who prefer English to other languages, is 130 (81%). And their reasons are:

- a. It is an alternative to the mother tongue in our country with a multiplicity of indigenous languages like Nigeria.

- b. English serves in administration, education law, mass media etc. in other words, it is the medium of acquiring formal education which enhances the social and economic status of individuals and consequently of the Nigeria situation.
- c. It is Nigerians means of gaining access to the world of scholarship in science, technology, arts Literature etc.
- d. It creates room for easy communication.
- e. It makes one feel recognized.

Table 8 — Question 10

What is your general attitude towards the use of English in all situations?

General attitude towards the use of English in all situations

Sex lass	Yoruba		Hausa		Igbo		Others	Total		
	Quite often	Hardly Ever	Quite often	Hardly ever	Quite often	Hardly ever		Quite often	Hardly ever	
Male	8	2	4	6	9	1	10	0	31	9
Upper										
Middle	6	4	2	8	7	3	8	2	23	17
Female										
Upper	9	1	6	4	10	0	9	1	34	6
Middle	7	3	3	7	8	2	7	3	25	15
Total	30	10	15	25	34	6	34	6	113	47

Analysis of the above Data

The result of the analysis of the data above is quite revealing of certain historical facts regarding the introduction and implantation of English language in Nigeria. It is an incontrovertible fact that Igboland had the earliest contacts with European language, according to (Oyelele 1990:1). In fact, Ogu (199:65) asserts that these contacts predated the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Some of the earliest churches and mission schools were established in Igboland to propagate Christianity and indirectly English. It is not surprising therefore, that 85% of the Igbo respondents used English quite often in all situation because the language has been with them for centuries. By coincidence, others (speakers of Nigerian languages besides Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo) also record 85%. The sociolinguistic factor by which this can be justified is the fact that English is only language by which they can interact with a wide range of people across cultures outside their use of English at almost all the time or quite often while only 38% of the Hausa respondents are in this category.

On the whole, 71% (approximately) of the sampled population have stable positive attitudes towards the use of English in almost all situations all the time. The breakdown of this is Yoruba (19%), Igbo (21%), Hausa (9%), approximately and any other language (21%).

The data also reveals that the socio-economic backgrounds are English monolingual and monocultures.

Table 9 — Question 11

How do you use these languages at home?



NB total percentage for both quite often and hardly ever = 100%

From the above data, it is quite revealing that the respondents use their mother tongue quite often at home.

Opinion	Yoruba		Hausa		Igbo		Total	
	Quite Often	Hardly Ever	Quite Often	Hardly Ever	Quite Often	Hardly Ever	Quite Often	Hardly Ever
Frequency	35	15	40	10	50	10	125	35
Percentage	22	9	25	6	31	6	78	22

Table 10 —Question 12

Which can you regard as the language of civil administration and civil servants/trade/business future possible national language?

	Yoruba	Igbo	Hausa	English	Total
Civil/admin/civil Servant	8 Yoruba 3 Hausa 2 English	4 Igbo 3 Hausa 3 English	2 Hausa 1 English	3 English	8Yoruba 8 Hausa 4 Igbo
				9 English	
Business	10Yoruba 2 Hausa 3 English	8 Igbo 2 Hausa 2 English	6 Hausa 1 Yoruba 3 English	2 Hausa 1Yoruba 3 English	11Yoruba 12 Hausa 8 Igbo 10 English
Students	5 Yoruba 2 Hausa 3 English	2 Igbo 6English	3 Hausa 2 English	5 English	5 Yoruba 2 Hausa 2 Igbo 20 None
Total	23 Yoruba 7 Hausa 12 English	14 Igbo 5 Hausa 11 English	11 Hausa 5English	2 Hausa 1Yoruba 11 English	24Yoruba 25 Hausa 39 English

From the above table, we have the result as Yoruba 24, Hausa 25, Igbo 14 while English 39. Because of the heterogeneous multiplicity of languages and culture in Nigeria and because English is the unifying tongue with a great instrumental significance, the attitude of Nigerians to English is strongly positive. Below is an analysis that has not been tabulated.

#### Question 13

What are the possible causes of the sociolinguistic problems of selecting a lingua franca in Nigeria?

To the above question, the respondents gave these as their answers:-

- i. Establishment of national language programs and policies.
- ii. Financial constraints
- iii. Acceptability and implementation of the suggested lingua franca.
- iii. A confused linguistic Allegiance.
- iv. Conflicting theories.

Below is another analysis that has not been tabulated.

#### Question 4

What do you think are the possible solutions to these problems of selecting a lingua franca in Nigeria?

Analysis

Views were aired out that if the problems/ constraints highlighted in the previous question are addressed especially-

- (1) Establishment of national language programs and policies
- (2) Adequate provision of funds (financial constraints) and then
- (3) Acceptability and implementation of suggested lingua franca.

In conclusion we posit that Tengen (1994:134) is quite accurate in his observation that, 'English and pidgin varieties are gradually becoming increasingly important even in the field of oral communication'.

The paper therefore recommend that:

- (a) Government should set up a large and professional language centre instead of the largely administrative set-up that now exists as a unit of Educational Services in the Federal Ministry of Education.
- (b) Youths corps members, most of who view the year of national service as one for loafing and wasting are obliged to spend their time in adult literacy work. Universities and other tertiary institutions can join in this exercise.
- (c) Department of Linguistics of Nigeria languages in different higher institutions should be encouraged to step up the production of graduates in linguistics and Nigeria languages. We strongly urge the government to consider this point seriously.
- (d) Every Nigerian child who has the opportunity of being in the University or any other institution of higher learning should study linguistics and a national language for which is not his mind and which he does not already speaks at least for two (2) semesters or more.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion therefore we posit that the emergence of a national language should be made an explicit goal of our language policy. However, experience has shown that the spread and acceptance of a language as a lingua franca is a necessary pre-condition for its emergence as an acceptable national language or official language.

Our priority in the short term is how to reconcile several competing and conflicting needs: the need to be fair to every child by educating him through his own language in the early years, the need to knit the various Nigeria

communities together and the need to optimize the utilization of scarce human and material resources in Education. The proposals made in this paper should not be interpreted as a reflection of linguistic fascism but as an attempt to reconcile these competing and conflicting needs.

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