

**LINGUISTIC MATTERS: IMPACT OF GOVERNMENT POLICY AND SUGGESTIVE ROLES FOR
THE PROMOTION OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES.**

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the policy of the government on linguistics matters as depicted by linguistic researchers. Government policy on language has great impact on the development of any language. This is because government has power through consultation with language scholars, linguistics and the general public to announce, accept and update language policy. From this language policy, priority has been given to English as the national language. Then the local language like Igbo may be used in addition to English if the house approves it. It is clear that the national policy is in favour of English as the language of government.

Introduction

GOVERNMENT AND ITS LANGUAGE POLICY.

Government policy on language has great impact on the development of any language. This is because government has power through consultation with language scholars, linguistics and the public to announce, accept and update language policy. The sustenance of any language in the world has been the collaborate effort of the government and the people. The need to find a language of wider communication among Nigerians and to satisfy nationalistic feelings is responsible for the clamour for a national language. In a national language, the individual sees the main indigenous language bond that holds the community together. It is seen as a vehicle for educating the citizens of a state to cultivate the spirit of solidarity and also as a symbol of national personality. It enhances unity, loyalty, allegiance and national consciousness which are marks of progress and national development. We, therefore, need a language that is national and that can be used for wider communication. It is in realization of this, that in 1975, the government made some policy statements which are enshrined in the constitution and the national policy on education documents. In each case, the statement refers to the ideology of the government. This can be viewed from two perspectives. The first one is political while the second is educational. The political according to section 51 of the Nigerian constitution of 1979, 1989 stipulates that the business of National Assembly shall be conducted in English and in Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba when adequate arrangement has been made. Section 91 of the same document also reads as follows,

The business of a house of Assembly shall be conducted in English, but the House may in addition to English conduct the business of the house in one or more other languages spoken in the state as the house may by resolution approve.(p.16)

From this language policy, priority has been given to English as the national language. Then the local languages like Igbo may be used in addition to English if the house approves it. It is clear that the National policy is in favour of English as the language of government. So it subdued the indigenous languages like Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. The language policy actually promoted the lack of interest that the Igbos show today since they are submissive to the government constitution.

Ayilara and Oyedjeji (2000) assert that indigenous languages have vital roles to play in the attainment of democracy in Nigeria. As Nigeria is a multi-lingual nation, the knowledge of many of the indigenous languages

in Nigeria will be of interest to politicians in political enlightenment. For the effective discussion in our parliament, they should use indigenous languages.

It is clear from what Ayilara and Oyedeji tell us that Nigeria as a trilingual linguistic community would have better or effective discussion in the parliament if we promote these local languages the way English has been promoted. Even though the language policy has it that the 'house' may in addition to English use one or more of the local languages, the policy still puts English in an unattainable position. If the policy had promoted the three languages and English equally, the case would have changed by now. Igbo language would have been valued more than it is done today.

Because of this promotion of English, Jowitt (1995) says that English will also remain an official language in Nigeria for a long time to come. He sees English undergoing a process of indigenization which already makes Nigerian English a recognizable and highly distinctive variety. This development will tend to make English less of a foreign language and more of an indigenous language in Nigeria. Although promoting English is not bad per se, but underrating the local languages and then clinging to English is not good as well. If the other two indigenous languages, Yoruba and Hausa should be examined, it will be clear that even though they speak English as national language but they do not underutilize their indigenous languages. Consider what happened sometime ago in 2011, when three students from the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria were called upon during a radio programme to speak their indigenous languages. The two students from Hausa and Yoruba respectively, spoke their indigenous language fluently. But when the Igbo boy was called to speak Igbo language, he did not even know how to greet in Igbo before speaking the language. This being the case, the whole blame cannot be on the government policy. Onuora (1982) says,

Whatever language policy enunciated
by the government is exactly what is to
be taught in schools. The academic
institute at the bedrock for the research
and updating of any cultural and
linguistic propaganda (p.11).

Hence, whatever is holds and teaches surely reflects on the society which is the practical ground and assimilation venue of the proceeds of the academic institutes. Ogbu (1984) pointed out that this is therefore why the government needs to be careful as to whatever they produce as language policy. Any society without a defined language policy is bent on experiencing a linguistic holocaust in such a world of technological and scientific advancement.

The educational ordinance (1982) whose aim is to control and direct educational activities in Nigeria has made mandatory that the teaching of subjects should be on English language only which means, in effect, that the teaching of Igbo and other native languages will not qualify for the voluntary agencies.

Nnagbo (2004) wrote that following the protest cry of missionaries, the 1920 ordinance which uplifted native languages to the standard of education was enacted. It states,

Among infants and young children, all instructions
should as far as possible be given in their vernacular.
The free development of their minds must not be tampered
with by making the assimilation of ideas
unnecessarily difficult by presenting them
in a language not easily understood (p.42).

The vernacular should be the medium of instruction where its use will aid in the thorough assimilation other school subjects (education ordinance 1926). Mbaeze (1984) stated that "Igbo language policy, to worsen this situation was the thirty years orthography controversy, which left many confused. The inability of the government to develop or evolve an Igbo language education policy, has left the students and their teachers on the confused state.

But for once in 1976, the Anambra State government had language policy, which limits, that Igbo should be compulsory in the First Leaving Certificate (F.S.L.C). As reported in the Weekly Newspaper (1976):

“Igbo language shall become compulsory
First School Leaving Certificate subject
with effect from June, 1979”.(p.45)

This same laws were also initiated by ImoState government. Nnagbo (2004) wrote that government having evaluated this sublime policy did not consider the procurements of Igbo language. This is because teachers were at its death, for many do not know Igbo language and could not pass the knowledge competence to the pupils. Ben (2003) said that the 1976 policy which Imo State government also adopted could be furthered in the post primary institutions, nor did it make any room for such enterprising language academy like society for promoting Igbo language and culture (SPILC).

Also a decade after the 1975 policy the government awakened under the pressure of concerned citizens, and in recognition to the nation’s educational policy on mother tongue, which states, in addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process, and as a means of presentation, the government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than their mother tongues, which are Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo.

The revised policy according to Dazie and Awonusi (2009), did little to change this view of the government, but it went further to stipulate that the Nigerian child in Junior Secondary School should be made to study English and two Nigerian languages, while that in senior secondary should study English and at least one Nigerian language. These policies, helped to make teachers less dependent officially on English as the sole role language of educational instruction.

It is important to point out that the role which English plays in our educational system can be traced back to the evolution of the system overtime. When missionaries established educational institutions in 1843, there was no clear-cut educational policy. The missionaries merely encouraged local children and adult converts to speak and read English so as to enhance their understanding of the Bible and to produce interpreters. Consequently, the era of missionary adventurism led to the teaching of English in many guises such as Dictation, Reading, Writing, Grammar and Composition. The typical school curriculum then, according to Taiwo (1980), comprised mainly, and sometimes entirely reading, writing, arithmetic and singing.

Thus, from the era of missionary education, English was taught as a subject and also used as the language of instructing in schools by foreign –speaking freed slaves (creoles) from Sierra Leone, Scottish and Irish men and a few Germans. The early use of English in the Nigerian educational system enhanced the status of the language, such that it almost became assimilationist in practice. As pointed out in the ‘Lagos times’ of 26th July, 1882, Nigerians then started using not only European goods, but also their names, with the result that converts educated in England pretended that they no longer understood their native languages and had to be spoken to through interpreters. Indeed, Fafunwa (1974) sums up the situation by explaining that, since the early explorers knew no local languages, the medium of instruction was English at the initial stages. Even parents encouraged the use of English and wanted their children to learn ‘the language of commerce, civilization and Christianity ...’

The first Nigerian educational ordinance of 1882 strengthened the position of English by officially declaring it as the language of instruction. As Ayandele (1966) points out, the 1882 ordinance did not take cognizance of the vernaculars, instead it declared ‘that all teachings from the lowest class to the highest must be done in the English language before a government grant could be obtained.’ The assimilationist effect was thus enhanced such that it was reported that all the students withdrew from a school in Ogoja in 1945 when ‘vernacular’ was introduced. In 1887 ordinance, in response to local criticisms, allowed the teaching of the vernaculars in schools. This, however, did not affect the status of English as government grants were still tied to the language of instruction in schools.

The situation did not change when the first schools were established in the Northern part of the country. Most of the teachers (non-missionaries) were drawn from the ranks of the English aristocracy and so readily promoted the use of English as the language of instruction in schools. This was how English gradually became established as the language of instruction in schools during the colonial period and after independence. Even during the era

of renewed interest in the teaching of Nigerian languages after the 1925 Phelps-Stokes Commission's Report, the status and role of English in the educational system was not changed.

Apart from its use as the language of instruction in Nigerian schools, the English language has also been institutionalized in the country as the language of educational evaluation. The 1887 Educational Ordinance, among other things, concerned itself with the problem of educational evaluation.

A few years after the introduction of the ordinance, the Henry Carr (1890) Inspection Report was accepted by the government. According to its recommendations, teachers were to be made to study and be tested in the teaching methodology of subjects in addition to their academic contents. Consequently, by the beginning of the 20th century, Nigerian teachers had been tested in the English language and its teaching methods.

However, the use of English as a means of education evaluation was not limited to teachers' education. The colonial administration introduced proficiency tests in English and regarded some knowledge of English as a criterion for obtaining jobs in the administration. Examinations which tested the use of English were also introduced in the public (civil) service.

The use of English evaluation continued in such a way that English became a compulsory subject in recognized examinations until 1952 when the West African Examination Council (WAEC) was established as a result of the adoption of the report in 1950 of Jeffrey Royal Commission. The West African Examinations Council conducted its own examinations and others on behalf of foreign examining bodies in the UK which still depended on English as a medium. In its own examinations, WAEC not only demanded English as the language of evaluation but insisted on a pass in the language as a condition for the award of a certificate in the first ten years of its existence. Today, most higher institutions, if not all in Nigeria, require a credit (c) in English for admission into the university no matter the course you want to study. But the local languages are not compulsory. In fact, you can get admission without them. Many universities don't even offer admission for the indigenous languages. During a meeting held among semipro management committee on the office of permanent secretary, ministry of education in library 1988, Duru (1990) states,

Among the most important thing discussed
in the meeting was the training of teachers
on the major three languages (p.4).

Serious attention was not given to Igbo language. In all the deliberations of the proposal, attention was paid on national language vis-à-vis Yoruba and Hausa. But coming to Igbo language, the recommendation read that while the above recommendations are intended to meet the extensive demands of the new policy on education, the promotion of Igbo language and culture should wait for further directive. That is to say, there has been no concluded policy on the Igbo language, all has been on the proposal table.

THE EFFECTS OF UNDERUTILIZATION OF THE IGBO LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA.

The underutilization of the Igbo language has serious negative effect in education and various socio-economic activities of Igbos in Nigeria. A great majority of educated Igbos have never been interested in their language and most of them cannot even write or read their own dialects in any script. Lack of sincerity to our language has made us not realize the depth of neglect of the Igbo language. The Igbo people are yet to be proud of this great and dynamic language. In support of all these, Afigbo (1983) states that,

Language teachers use English language
throughout the subject duration. It is
only when we give special interest in
teaching and learning Igbo in schools,
that our sincerity in the language could
be real. (p.31).

Okoro (2004) in the same vein said that the problem in our schools is that Igbo language cannot be given much attention because it is a mother tongue, it is assumed that everybody should know it. One pathetic thing is that teachers feel very proud in teaching English and making it more interesting, while they do not care to make use of teaching aids to arouse the interest of students in the Igbo language.

Adamme (2003) writes that the system of teaching in schools where English language is given much preference to the Igbo language has led to a situation where the educated Igbo contributed to the underutilization of the language. There is no way the Igbo language can develop since it is neglected in our educational system. A compounding issue of the Igbo language is the fact that there is yet no formulated language policy for the study and teaching of the Igbo language. It is beyond doubt that every language is what the owners make it. If the Igbos had shown special interest in their culture and language as they showed in English, there would have been more improvement to the development of the language. Socially, administratively and educationally, it is regrettable that Igbo language has not moved beyond where the European masters left it.

Afigbo (1981) says that educated Igbos failed their language even more than the European administrators did. It could be said that Igbo language is one of those aspects of Igbo life and culture which came to be completely overwhelmed by British imperialism. The Igbos resisted the European masters politically and economically, but allowed their language to face victim of English language. Afigbo maintains that:

Igbos cannot dust their language and accept it proudly as theirs. They have proudly succumbed to other languages, and this has bedeviled Igbo language socially, administratively and educationally which are the effect of underutilization. (p.30).

It is amazing to note how fluently most of the Igbo citizens speak foreign languages proudly, and how poorly they express themselves in the language of their ethnic group. In similar remark Nnagbo (2001) writes that every human being is a social animal, and in whatever he does, whether he fights, celebrates etc, he needs one important thing to achieve his social interest, and that thing is language. Many Igbos claim that by indulging in speaking English, people would realize that they are educated. This ugly trend also extends to villages where the traditional rulers are proud in their use of English language while addressing their subjects in most of their traditional activities.

Nnagbo, citing case of embarrassment carried out says that even during the 1994 Igbo day held at the NnamdiAzikiwe Stadium, Enugu, all the speeches read on the program was clearly typed in English. One wonders what significantly made it our Igbo day, was it the masquerade, traditional attires, and the people that came from all Igbo land? The Igbo language was nowhere heard among the dignitaries. Could it be because of formality? Ben (2000) says that one of the things noticed in Igbo land is that the government administrators do not communicate effectively with people in their local language. There is hardly a government office one would enter without finding himself facing what is called Formal language, that is, English. No one can be offered appointment without his ability to speak, read and write English language fluently not Igbo language. This is very common in Igbo land unlike Hausa land, where special preferences is given to those who can speak Hausa language fluently. Administrators in Hausa land hardly speak foreign language in their offices. In every government office, Hausa language is the common language of communication. If a stranger fails to communicate in Hausa language, his purpose and aim of visitation will be neglected. Yoruba is also highly valued in Yoruba land by the speakers the way the Hausas do. Why can't Igbos imitate them.

According to Benson (2004), the effects of undermining Igbo language has devastated the cordial relationship between rural dwellers and the government agencies, where villagers cannot understand or communicate with the administrators in English language and they shy away from expressing their feelings. No wonder, some areas are neglected. In some areas where there are few educated people, the areas are highly neglected and underdeveloped. This is because our mother tongue has been under used as a medium of communication. Government programmes are always made on English language and people are expected to make requests in English other than their indigenous language (Igbo).

It is against the above effect that Nnagbo (2004) suggests that the government of the Igbo linguistic area should be effective in using Igbo to give address to the people more than they use English language. According to him, it will help to foster healthy relationship and effective realization of the government objective. The government has to set the examples by giving the Igbo language its place on her policy.

We have reviewed related literatures under four broad headings, definition of bilingualism, the underutilization of Igbo language, the causes of the underutilization, and the effects or results of the underutilization. The whole study boils down to the fact that the Igbo language is underutilized by Igbo man himself, who sees his culture and language as inferior to others, and who thinks that by indulging in English, he will be considered to be an educated man. We emphasize that this bad trend has to be de-emphasized because the language of the people is both their ethnic and national pride. The Igbo man should campaign the full immortalization of his language, if he intends to be noticed in the country.

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