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French: Nigeria's Second Official Language?

Margaret Okon

Introduction:

The status given to French in the Nigerian school system has grown since independence in 1960. Educational French in pre-colonial Nigeria was limited to a few elite urban Secondary Schools, with the aim of inculcating French cultural and artistic worldview in the learners. Today, French is taught in almost all Secondary Schools as in most Nursery Schools across the country. The *National Policy on Education* (1981) recognizes French as a non-vocational elective in the Junior Secondary School Curriculum and as an elective in the Senior Secondary Curriculum (together with other foreign languages). However, it was later declared Nigeria's second official language and made a compulsory core subject in both Junior and Senior secondary schools with effect from the 1998/99 academic year (cf. National Policy on Education, 1998).

The big question is: does Nigeria really need a *second foreign* official language? Though the argument for French as a foreign language in Nigeria are many, given her socio-economic, military and diplomatic interest in the West African sub-region and in global politics. There is also a strong opinion that the development of our indigenous languages could contribute immensely to our overall

national development (cf: Iwara, 2000). This paper seeks to answer the questions raised above by redefining the role of French, English and Nigerian languages in the Nigerian multilingual set-up.

French as a Language of Wider Communication:

The importance of language in general to the human race is of continuing interest to scholars, linguists and philosophers alike. According to Hakuta and Cancino (1977), language provides one of the most readily accessible windows into the nature of the human mind. With regard to the selection of a *foreign* language (French) as Nigeria's second official language, the status of that language worldwide is a constructive guide. French is one of the world's most widely-spoken languages, rivaled only by English as the language of international communication and diplomacy. Globally, French is an official language of many organizations including the United Nations and agencies like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO); International Labour Organization (ILO) and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), to mention just a few.

In Europe, French is the official language in all the important organisations of the European Economic Community, among which are the Council of Europe (Strasbourg), the Hague Conference on International and Private Law, Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development. In Africa, French is an official language of the

Organisation of African Unity (OAU) now renamed African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Outside France where French is the native language, it is one of the official languages of Belgium, Switzerland, Canada, Luxembourg, and of more than fifteen African countries. French dependencies in the Caribbean, in South America, in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, also use French as their official language. In addition, French is the second language of a number of countries including Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Lebanon, Syria, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

French in Nigeria:

Nigeria is surrounded by French speaking countries – Cameroon in the East, the Republic of Benin in the West and Niger and Chad in the North. As language is a powerful tool for unity, Nigerians would associate more freely with their Francophone neighbours if they could speak French. Indeed, fluency in the language would expose Nigerians to the vast economic potentials of neighbouring countries. Presently, many Nigerians are engaged in commercial activities with their French – speaking neighbours and would be able to carry out their transactions, without inhibitions if they spoke French well, for then, some of the problems they usually encounter with the gendarmes could be avoided.

Furthermore, the increasingly high rate of foreign travel should give new impetus to the study of French in

Nigeria. Apart from making one feel at home in a foreign culture, French, or any other foreign language for that matter, breaks language barriers, enhances wide interaction and provides useful reading knowledge. Thus, a working knowledge of French is imperative for Nigeria to establish a close relationship with her immediate neighbours, with French – speaking co-members of international organizations, and with France with which she shares bilateral and technical co-operation. For, how can one who cannot speak French be a diplomat in a French country?

One should not lose sight of the fact that Nigeria still requires foreign scientists and technicians to help develop her vast natural resources. For this reason, Nigeria sends some of her citizens to France to learn French technology while France sends her citizens to assist Nigeria in the area of technological development. Indeed, France has contributed to the development of the Nigerian economy as evidenced by the existence of many French companies in Nigeria these past decades. As at 1983, France ranked 4th among the nations in technical partnership with Nigeria, coming after the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States. On the whole, the Franco – Nigerian trade relations have greatly improved since the 1970s, and the volume of trade between the two countries has more than trippled over the last two decades. Many French construction companies are in active business in many Nigerian towns, especially in Lagos and Abuja, and many multi-national French

companies (Total, Elf, Societe Generale, IBWA, CFAO, and Peugeot) have provided employment for Nigerians.

When a country adopts a foreign language, it is for a specific purpose. From the foregoing, it is obvious that Nigeria has very close ties with France for political, economic, technical reasons. French is advantageous in Nigeria for international relations, being a language of wider communication. It has distinguished itself from other foreign languages in Nigeria (German, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Arabic, etc) by its statutory international (and regional) values. Evidently, French has the status of “a privileged foreign language” in Nigeria. Even though it is not the language of the immediate environment like the home, school, office or the media, it is understood, spoken and written at varying degrees by those who study it in school and those who have lived in France and other Francophone countries.

Though the French language may not be indispensable, a working knowledge of it could be an asset in all spheres of life. Professor Ade Ojo, Director of the French Village in Badagry observes that:

a graduate of French ... is an asset to any society. He is the one who has the best authority to allow Nigerians be understood beyond our shores. He can perform many of the literary acts; he will go out to be the best journalist, the best administrator, best diplomat, best immigration officer, best

customs officer, even in the military he will perform exceptionally well in intelligence service, he will be the one who will be an interpreter, translator. He will also be able to market goods beyond our shores. (26)

It is believed that, as the world is becoming a global village, the French language will be a great asset to Nigerians in the new millennium and beyond. If French is made Nigeria's second official language then the generation of Nigerians in the 21st century will be bilingual persons, in two foreign languages – English and French and according to Bamgbose (1991), the bilingual person is an asset to the community.

As Adekunle Adeniran (6) rightly observes, "language deficiency is at the root of the poverty cycle". Language deficiency by way of not understanding and speaking one of the world's most-widely spoken languages, can place one in an economically disadvantaged position.

The gains of speaking a foreign language generally are numerous. Van Els, Bongaerts, G. Extra, et al. (1984) citing Rivers (1968) enumerate a number of arguments in favour of teaching foreign languages as follows: it aids their [the pupils] intellectual development; it aids their cultural development by bringing them into contact with the literature written in other languages; it enriches their personalities by bringing them into contact with other customs, norms and ways of thinking; it deepens their understanding of the

way in which languages work; it enables them to communicate with speakers of a different language, either by means of the written word, or by means of the spoken word; it contributes to better international relations.

The fourth argument put up by Rivers goes to buttress the fact that knowledge of one language enhances the learning of another. Now that many African nations (including Nigeria) have seen the need to develop and promote their indigenous languages, the teaching and learning of French is expected to enhance the teaching and learning of indigenous languages. From the perspective of theoretical linguistics, the presence of French, English and Nigerian languages in Nigeria constitutes a fertile terrain for comparative studies. It is interesting to note that English and French languages have borrowed profusely from one another.

Many French words like *hors-d'oeuvre*, *charged affaires*, *aide-de-camp*, *barbecue*, *esprit de corps*, *rendezvous*, *fiancé(e)*, *renaissance*, to mention but a few, have remained lexical items of the English language since the year 1066 when Guillaume le Bastard conquered England and introduced the French language there. French remained the language of the elite in England for many centuries. In the same manner, many English words have found their way into the French vocabulary. Such words include *weekend*, *parking*, *camping*, *barmen* and *tennis*. But clearly there are more words from French into English.

In spite of the foregoing, Nigeria does not need to adopt French as a foreign *official* language when English is already playing that role. Indeed, French appears to have been losing its popularity in contemporary world politics since after the Gulf War. Statistics have shown that the enrolment rate in English language has been on the increase in Europe while the rate of enrolment in French language has been decreasing (personal communication with Dr. G. Teke).

The English Language in Nigeria's Multilingual Context:

It is not out of place for this paper to draw attention to the role of the English language against the background of Nigeria's plurilingual setting. The story of English in Nigeria relates that the earliest European traders and their Nigerian middlemen along the various coasts used it as their contact language. This contact gave rise to varieties of English, like pidgin English (Kachru, 1995 vi-vii). With the coming of the missionaries and the establishment of schools, English was developed and spread in Nigeria (Akindele & Adegbite, 1999:61). The Nigerian Government had therefore shown considerable interest in the teaching of English in the school system long before independence, as it was the language of the colonial masters. *The National Policy on Education* (Revised 1981, 1998) accords it a pride of place as a core subject at all levels of education.

So right from its introduction into Nigeria, the English language has been serving as a contact language not only

between Nigerians and Europeans, but also among Nigerians from diverse ethnic groups. English is Nigeria's official language of commerce, law, politics, administration, education and culture at significant levels. Adequate knowledge of it is an indispensable requirement for higher education. Unlike the indigenous languages, English does not engender any ethnic hostility. Rather, it has ensured a peaceful co-existence in Nigeria's linguistic diversity, that is, it is ethnically neutral.

The role of English in Nigeria is therefore that of mediation – creating unity in diversity, and the situation may remain so for a long time to come. This is so because the multiplicity of languages in the country has made the choice of a common national indigenous language almost impossible. Be that as it may, the country should embark on serious language planning that will develop our national languages to cope with the linguistic needs of our changing society.

The Indigenous Languages:

Apart from the three major languages Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, there are over 500 other indigenous languages in Nigeria (cf. Crozier & Blench, 1992). These languages correspond to the various ethnic groups in the country. The debate on the development and use of our indigenous languages in education and for national development has been on for a long time now and many have made strong cases for it. Iwara (2000), stressing the role of indigenous

languages in national development, identifies cultural knowledge which is embedded in the indigenous languages as an important aspect of national development. According to him:

... a nation seeking development must possess a dynamic knowledge of its cultural identity in order to orientate its developmental efforts appropriately. This cultural knowledge is embedded in the constituent languages of the nation. It is evident, therefore, that the study and promotion of these languages are an essential ingredient in national development, (2).

Indeed, it is only through our indigenous languages that we can properly express our culture. The National Policy on Education, NPE (3rd edition, 1998) recognizes fully the importance of indigenous languages in education and states that every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment. (This may or may not be the child's mother tongue but definitely should be an indigenous language). In addition to the language of the immediate environment, the child is expected to learn one of the three major languages – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (8). The policy further states that secondary education shall "develop and promote Nigerian languages, art and culture in the context of world cultural heritage". (p.12) The NPE makes provision for mass literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (cf:

Section 7). The success of the program depends to a large extent on the use of the local languages as media of instruction in order to create an impact on the grassroots.

Developing indigenous languages is in line with what obtains in other African countries. Bienvenu Akoha (1999) says that the promotion of Beninois languages has been the preoccupation of the intellectuals and government of the Republic of Benin in the last twelve years. In the wake of the African Renaissance, the issue of mother tongue education has been a recurrent theme. For some (cf: Kamwangamalu; 2001) there cannot be an African renaissance without a linguistic renaissance. And what does a linguistic renaissance entail? It entails developing, promoting and using African languages as media of learning and teaching at all levels and in all spheres of life – economic, political, administrative, etc. As Kamwangamalu puts it, it entails "making [the indigenous languages] desirable and effective [tools] for educational development, economic opportunity, political participation, social mobility and cultural practice" (103).

It is possible to make every indigenous language an effective tool for educational development since linguistically, each language is a complete system in its own right with its own structure or grammar at the phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic levels. Consequently, our indigenous languages can be used to

serve all the functions that the societies in which they are rooted, would want to serve.

Conclusion:

Having examined the importance of French, English and Nigerian languages in Nigeria, we conclude that, though French is an important international language as evidenced by the arguments raised in this paper, its adoption as Nigeria's second language is not necessary. Nigeria does not need a *second foreign* official language.

English is already playing the role of a foreign official language both at national and international levels. At this stage of the nation's development, indigenous languages should be encouraged to meet the demands of a modern technological and computerized society. However, given the worldwide status of French, it should be taught in our educational system. At best, it is a "privileged" foreign language in Nigeria.

Nigerian languages should be developed and promoted for wider use. Strategies could be borrowed from the teaching of French to enhance the teaching of indigenous languages. For instance, the sophisticated methods of learning French could be adapted for the learning of indigenous languages. Didactic materials for indigenous languages could be developed, modeled on those for French (or other foreign languages). On the other hand, Nigerian cultural elements could form part of authentic didactic materials to better teach French (materials prepared

by the Centre for French Teaching and Documentation – CFTD, Jos). This will go a long way in ensuring a harmonious co-existence of both French (and other foreign languages) and indigenous languages in Nigeria and Africa in general, as both categories of languages are valued in their appropriate domains.

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