

FRENCH AS NIGERIA'S SECOND OFFICIAL LANGUAGE: NEED FOR POLICY FORMULATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

INTRODUCTION

The current national language policy as contained in the *Federal Republic of Nigeria Policy on Education* (1981) encourages the teaching and learning of English (the official language), Nigerian indigenous languages like Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba, as well as foreign languages such as French and German. During the military regime of the late General Sani Abacha¹, the Head of State proposed French as Nigeria's second official language, after English. What are the implications of General Abacha's French language option for national and international development in the new millennium?

In this paper, we shall discuss primarily the need for the formulation and implementation of the national language policy on French as Nigeria's second *lingua franca*. The study will show that as an important medium of communication at the national, intra-African and international levels, French language has a vital developmental role to play in the existence of literary art and studies in Nigeria, as well as in the cultural, socio-economic and political life of modern Nigeria and Africa in general.

Nigerian Literature Written in or Translated into French

Nigerian literary works of art abound in different languages spoken and written in Nigeria. A great majority of them (novels, short stories, poetry and drama) are published in English. Some of the works are written in indigenous languages such as igbo, efik, yoruba, and hausa. For instance, presently, igbo literature in igbo comprises over 300 titles including the following: C.E. Oformata's *Anu Gbaa Ajo Oso* (novel, 1994), T. U. Ubesie's *Juo Obinna* (novel, 1976), I.U. Nwadike's *Echiche Miri Emi* (poetry, 1990), F. C. Ogbalu's *Mbem Na Egwu Igbo* (poetry, 1978), G.O. Onyekaonwu's *Uwa Ntooo* (drama, 1986), B.N. Igbokwe's *Ogbu Mmadu Ndu na-agu* (drama, 1995) and G.I. Nwaozuzu's *Ome Ihe Jide Ofo* (drama, 1991).

It is important to note that a significant number of Nigerian works were published in foreign languages, either Arabic or French. Some of the titles in French are as follows: Anthony O. Biakolo's *L'Etannante Enfance d' Inotan* (roman, 1980), Debe Osaji's *L'Oracle de l'île Biafuluwa* (roman, 1984), V.O. Okeke's *Le Syndrome 419* (roman, 2000), Enoch Ajunwa's *Destiné*

à suivre, (roman, 2004), Ben Okri's *Combat mental* (poetry, 1999) and Ada Ugah's *Rêves interdits suivis de La Révolte des Griots et de Rêves retrouvés* (poetry, 1983).

In addition, several works written in English by Nigerians have been translated into French, for exemple, Amos Tutuola's *L'Ivrogne dans la brousse* (1953) and *La Femme plume* (2000), Chinua Achebe's *Le Monde s'effondre* (1966), *Le Malaise* (1974), *Le Démagogue* (1977), *La Flèche de Dieu* (1978) and *Femmes en guerre et autres nouvelles* (1981). Others are Chuwuemeke Ike's *Fils de panthère* (2000), Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* (1988), Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1988), Ola Balogun's *Shango suivi de Roi-Elephant* (1968) and Femi Osofisan's *Les Tisserins* (1990). The French versions of works by Nigerian authors include the following plays of Wole Soyinka: *La Danse de la forêt* (1973), *La Métamorphose de Frère Jéro* (1986) and *La Révolte de Kongi* (1988). Besides, this playwright published some collections of poems like *Idanre* (1982), *Cycles sombres* (1987) and *La Terre de Mandela* (1989), as well as some novels like *Aké. Les Années d'enfance* (1984), *Homme est mort* (1986) and *Ibadan. Les Années pagaiillées* (1977).

From the point of view of theory and methodology of literary criticism, for instance, reception and sociocriticism theories, literature is a medium of communication *par excellence* between the writer and his or her readers (see Iwuchukwu, 2003: 296-312). The relevance of Hans Robert Jauss' assertion that follows attests to this observation:

Activité de communication, la littérature n'est pas un simple produit mais aussi un facteur de production de la société. Elle véhicule des valeurs esthétiques, éthiques, sociale, qui peuvent contribuer aussi bien à transformer la société qu'à la perpétuer telle qu'elle est (Jauss, 1978 : 78).

[Literature is a form of communicative activity. It is not a simple product but a tool for national development. It conveys aesthetic, ethical and societal values which are necessary for both continuity and change in the modern society².]

Literature in any language, oral or written, transcends the limits of aesthetic expression. Léopold Sédar Senghor, renowned African poet, philosopher and politician, rightly pointed out that in Africa, art for the sake of art does not exist in the sense that the expression of art is essentially functional and collective (Senghor, 1964:207). In other words, like other African arts (song, music, dance, sculpture, etc.), literary art is basically a social and functional object.

In this regard, let us take a look at Anthony O. Biakolo's *L'Etonnante Enfance d' Inotan* (1980), the first Nigerian novel written in French. Biakolo also published in English *Inotan and the River Goddess* (1992), a sequel to the first novel. The narrative in French focuses on the extraordinary babyhood of Inotan in the Nigerian city of Warri and its environs, during the period of colonization in Nigeria

Portrayed as "un bébé extraordinaire", the one-year old baby, Inotan, is endowed with special gifts from God such as intelligence, wisdom and power of speech. At his traditional naming ceremony, he received God's blessing through an old wise man (Inedu) that gave him the name "Inotan", hence Inedu's declaration concerning the baby:

Il marchera avec circonspection sur la terre et écrasera le mal (36).
[He will work with wisdom to eliminate evil in the modern society].

Inotan will become Biakolo's hero in the two novels, with many exceptional talents comparable to those of Wangrin in Amadou Hampaté Bâ's *L'Etrange Destin de Wangrin* (1973). But contrary to the portrayal of Wangrin as a trickster or corrupt character, Inotan mobilizes his talents and energy for a productive venture in the overall interest of his community and country. Exceptionally, his deep sense of social commitment started to manifest itself at the age of one. At this early age, he started to make a significant contribution towards the development of his community and country in the following sectors: social work, traditional medicine, and conflict resolution. Apart from rescuing her mother Anijula from an attempted rape, he intervenes as a mediator in a conflict involving two groups of warriors and, like Manual in Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1946), will succeed in bringing about a reconciliation between the two opposing factions. In *Inotan and the River Goddess* (1992), the first paragraph of the novel operates as an important flashback with respect to this particular episode:

Inotan was now four years old. Three years had gone by since he miraculously saved Warri from a bloodbath. His final role in that ethnic conflict had almost been forgotten. It was infact acknowledged only by a few [...] (1).

Certainly, in *L'Etonnante Enfance d' Inotan*, the use of French enables Biakolo to communicate his vision of new Warri and Nigeria to his French-speaking readers within and outside the African continent, especially

Nigerians. While promoting the use of dialogue in conflict resolution, Biakolo stresses the need to integrate viable modern values from the Western culture into the Nigerian oral tradition which is represented in the fictional work. Like most post-colonial African novels written in French, his work is essentially an amalgam of oral and written genres: use of French and Nigerian languages (such as the Igbo name Inedu and Urhobo name Omonigho), folk tale, traditional and christian religions, flashback, omniscient narrator, dialogue, metaphor, satire, etc. As Claire Dehon (2001) rightly pointed out, Biakolo's style of writing in French is basically realistic (213).

The socio-cultural issues raised in Biakolo's novel are important and relevant to Nigeria and Africa at large in the new millennium, especially the peace settlement relating to the interethnic clashes and violence in Warri and its environs. Judging from the viewpoint of Biakolo's protagonist, creating an enabling environment for a harmonious coexistence between tradition and modernity should normally breed social justice, unity and peace.

Tool for Fostering Socio-cultural Interactions

Language is indeed a communicative and socio-cultural activity. Linguistic *codes*, as Roger Fowler puts it, "interpret, organise and classify the subjects of discourse. They embody the theories of how the world is arranged: world views or ideologies" (cited by Anohu, 1996:411). This implies that language, culture and world views or ideologies are interrelated. Similarly, C. Cook (1991) noted as follows:

One avowed goal of language teaching is to enhance a better brain-training and logical thinking. Other goals include the appreciation of serious literatures [...] appreciation of other cultures and races and communication with people in other countries (4).

Apparently, in African countries such as Nigeria, French language encourages literary production as well as studies and research in African and comparative literatures. It is expected that writing in French will go a long way in projecting the Nigerian authors concerned and their works on *Francophonie's* international scene within and outside Africa.

As some of the Nigerian titles in French clearly indicate, the pre- and post-independence Nigerian literature conveys traditional and modern Nigerian cultural values and beliefs which play a vital role in national development, especially in Nigeria and the West African sub-region.

Through their numerous works, Nigerian writers like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka stress the need to strike and maintain a good balance between traditional African and modern Western languages, cultures and civilizations (see Achebe, 1973: 1-4; Nwoga, 1996:152-165).

It is pertinent to address at this point the question of linguistic and cultural diversity in Nigeria. Multiethnic, polyglot and multicultural, Nigeria speaks over 200 different indigenous languages. Mackey represented this peculiar socio-cultural reality in his preface to C.M.B Brann's international comparative bibliography:

The making of modern Nigeria is one of the greatest problems in state-building of any area in the world today. A state of such ethnic and religious diversity containing thousands of ancient cultures and hundreds of living languages is indeed more difficult to centralize than was any nation of Europe. Here we have representatives of all the known African language families, as well as a meeting place of the three cultures that are fashioning modern Africa – Traditional, Islamic and Christian. In no other country is the confluence of these three streams more striking than it is in the Nigerian linguistic and social situation, where the wealth of indigenous languages, several of them with a millenary tradition of oral and written literature, encounters the Arabic-Islamic tradition from the North and the European Christian from the South (cited by Sofunke, 1990:44).

From the point of view of culture, Nigeria symbolises the triple heritage of modern Africa, namely the African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam. Her cultural diversity is somewhat a microcosm of the modern African culture. However, the Southern part of Nigeria is predominantly christian whereas the North is dominated by islam. The diversity of Nigerian culture can be expressed orally and in writing in English, French and some indigenous languages.

However, Nigerian languages have self-imposed ethnic boundaries that tend to hinder intercultural communication. For instance, igbo and idoma are confined to the South-Eastern region and Otukpo area of the country respectively. Like English, French is a language of wider communication which can adequately serve as a linguistic and cultural bridge between the Islamic North and the Christian South of Nigeria. It will serve as a *lingua franca* which Ali A. Mazrui (1986) rightly presented as "a medium of communication across cultural and ethnic boundaries" (39). This observation tallies with the declaration made by R. Akpofure, a former special adviser to the Head of State on Education:

We are interested in French language itself because of its importance as an international as well as an intra-African vehicle of communication. We are also interested in it because of our multilingual problems. We can open the doors of solving many other problems both national and international (cited by Iwuchukwu, 1998: 64).

Language is a potent agent of cooperation and integration. French language is somewhat a unifying factor in the Nigerian linguistic and cultural diversity system. It is also an important vehicle of communication at the national, intra-African and international levels. Through the use of dialogue in conflict resolution, French language will help to eliminate or alleviate interethnic or interreligious conflicts within and outside Nigeria, especially in the West African sub-region.

Most Nigerians are aware that our country is surrounded almost exclusively by Francophone countries such as Chad, Niger and Republic of Benin. Besides, we know that such countries outnumber their anglophone counterparts in both West and Central Africa.

In addition, we believe that the knowledge and use of French language by the working and business population of Nigeria will enhance socio-cultural interactions and cooperation between Nigeria and the 52 member countries of the *Francophonie*, particularly between Nigeria and France.

Tool for Promoting Professional and Economic Development

As we are aware, France operates several business enterprises in Nigeria. Her multinational companies operating in different states of the Federation include the following: Air France, Elf, Total, PAN (Peugeot Automobile Nigeria), Michelin, Bouygues, Fougerolle, CFAO and SCOA.

These French companies contribute immensely to the social and economic development of Nigeria. They offer job opportunities to thousands of qualified Nigerians irrespective of age, sex, religion and family background; and this helps to solve the problem of unemployment in the country. However, most of their Nigerian employees are not as productive as expected due to their illiteracy in French. For this reason, some employers resort to mounting viable training programmes in French for their professionals or staff with special skills such as engineers, technologists and computer analysts. In fact, literacy in French promotes self-actualization that will enable Nigerians to make a more significant contribution to both national and international development.

Since the independence of African countries between the late fifties and early sixties, Nigeria has always played a major leadership role in the economic activities of the West African sub-region. We all know that the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has its headquarters in the Federal capital, Abuja. Since 9 out of the 16 member countries of ECOWAS are francophone, whereas others are anglophone, English and French are the official languages of this important organization.

During the last ECOWAS summit in Abuja (2004), members resolved to implement the use of the common currency *ECO* within ECOWAS in 2005, but it was later deferred for 4 years (until 2009) due to some logistic problems. This organization is comparable to other international economic blocs such as the European Union (EU) and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Through the use of English and French as *lingua francae*, ECOWAS aims at promoting free movement of persons, goods and services within the member countries.

French is also the second working language, after English, of many other relevant international organizations, for instance, New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), African Development Bank (ADB), Association of African Universities (AAU), International Labour Organization (ILO), United Nations Organization (UNO), United Nations Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF), Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and World Health Organization (WHO). As an active member of these organizations, Nigeria participates in their activities which are geared towards national and international development.

Tool for the Enhancement of Political and Diplomatic Relations

In the domain of politics and international affairs, French language will go a long way in strengthening Nigeria's multilateral relations with the member nations of *Francophonie*, especially in the African continent and West African sub-region. French is the official or national language of 24 African countries³, 9 of which are Nigeria's neighbours as well as members of ECOWAS. The ability of Nigerians to read and write in French will ensure closer cooperation between Nigeria and the *Francophonie* international community⁴. It has been observed that Nigeria has embassies or diplomatic missions abroad in virtually all the francophone African and non-African countries including France, Belgium and Canada. Nigeria's relationship with other African countries, especially with her

francophone neighbours, is of vital importance to her security and development. It will also determine to some extent the destiny of Nigeria as "the giant of Africa". Besides, breaking any existing communication barriers among Nigeria's neighbours will help to promote the principles of democracy, transparency and accountability in governance in the West African sub-region.

The present Nigerian Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, is also the current President of the African Union (AU). As seen in the case of ECOWAS, the francophone member countries of this organization outnumber their anglophone counterparts.

The African Union, ECOWAS and United Nations Organization have peace and security forces that work relentlessly on peace settlement in different crisis-ridden parts of Africa, such as Ivory Coast, Liberia, Congo and Sudan.

Towards the Formulation and Implementation of the Language Policy on French

Obviously, French language is an important vehicle of communication at the national, intra-African and international levels. We believe that the knowledge and use of French as the second official language in Nigeria will enhance mutual understanding and cooperation between Nigeria and her francophone African neighbours. On this note, S. Cookey, a former Special Adviser to the Head of State, made the following pronouncement in 1970:

We in the Federal Ministry of Education regard French as a very important subject in schools all over the Federation and we are doing everything possible to encourage its teaching [...]. We want our schools to produce people who can speak the language and thus help to establish more contact between English-speaking and French-speaking African countries (cited by Dada, 1979:32).

In the seventies, the situation of French in Nigeria was indeed relatively good in the sense that the teaching and learning of this language was compulsory in a significant number of secondary schools across the country. Such schools produced thousands of candidates in French that were eligible for admission into various degree and NCE programmes in French.

But the situation changed in the eighties and nineties mainly because French was reduced to the status of "elective" in the national education system, at the secondary school level. In this regard, Chris U. Agbedo (1998) pointed out that "French is barely tolerated as a non-vocational elective in Nigeria's school curricula and therefore hardly enjoys even the questionable status of English as the nation's *lingua franca*" (74).

The devaluation of French in the Nigerian education system posed other serious problems, such as lack of qualified French teachers, inadequate funding and infrastructure, non-payment of teachers' salaries, lack of interest on the part of many French teachers and students, and high school dropout rate (Ahukanna, 1984:127-146). Consequently, due to lack of qualified candidates for admission into their various programmes in French, some tertiary institutions in the country started to run their respective pre-degree or pre-NCE programmes in French, whereas others introduced beginners' level French in the first year of study.

What should be the status of French in Nigeria in the new millenium? What can be done to revamp our strengths and deal with our deficiencies with regard to the teaching of this language in our schools?

In our humble opinion, the national language policy should be reviewed to accommodate French as Nigeria's second official language, in conforrmity with the pro-French pronouncement made by the late General Sani Abacha, a former Nigerian Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces:

We do recognise that our sub-region, West Africa, consists of peoples divided not only by artificial colonial boundaries but also by linguistic differences. The lack of easy communication posed by the linguistic barriers has serious implications for the realisation of our goal of total integration within our sub-region. It is important to address this issue in the interest of sub-regional intergration. Nigeria will embark on a vigorous language programme that should ensure that our people, within the shortest possible time, become bilingual [...] (cited by Modum, 2001:11).

Bilingualism implies the knowledge and use of French as a second official language in Nigeria, after English. The above policy statement was contained in the address delivered by General Abacha on December 14, 1996 at the "1996 Annual Patron's Dinner" of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs in Abuja. Two months later, in a press release issued in Abuja on February 14, 1997, the Head of State reaffirmed his position

on the issue, stressing that "nine of the sixteen countries of the sub-region were French-speaking, with Nigeria completely surrounded by Francophone countries" (*ibid*: 12).

Considering Nigeria's leadership role in the West African sub-region as well as her cooperative relationship with her francophone neighbours, it is absolutely imperative for Nigeria to formulate and implement an acceptable language policy on French as Nigeria's second *lingua franca*.

The Federal Government should therefore ensure that the teaching and learning of French is made compulsory at the primary and secondary school levels. Many stakeholders in Nigeria and abroad share the same view on the issue. For instance, the *Daily Times* (1997) called for a review of the *Federal Republic of Nigeria Policy on Education* (1981) under the headline "Make French Compulsory" (1997:1) in our schools. It is interesting to note that in some states of the Federation like Anambra, Delta, Lagos and Imo, the teaching of French is compulsory in most secondary schools.

As a matter of urgent necessity, Nigeria and France should mount adequate teacher training programmes in French in order to deal with the problem of lack of qualified French teachers. In other words, the Federal Government of Nigeria, in collaboration with the French Embassy, should embark on a massive training of French teachers for both primary and secondary schools across the country. Already 6 out of 73 Universities as well as 17 Colleges of Education in Nigeria have been selected as pilot institutions⁵ for the training of French teachers.

Besides, in the light of General Abacha's bilingual vision of modern Nigeria, qualified teachers handling other secondary school subjects, science teachers in particular, should be encouraged to become bilingual in English and French. According to the official newsletter of the University of Nigeria, *Information Bulletin* (2004):

The distinguished performance of the University of Nigeria Secondary School in the past national French Competitions has earned it the status of a bilingual institution. This position is at the moment being enjoyed by only three other schools in Nigeria. The agreement in this regard, which has just been signed by the Board of Governors with the French Government offers tremendous opportunities to both staff and students of the school in terms of exchange programmes, scholarships, books and teaching aids, in addition to other language facilities. Already two staff of the school, Mr. Jeremiah C. Omeje of the Mathematics Department and Mr. F.A.K. Ekwele of the Biology Department will be going to France on

a one month study programme in French [...]. Other members of staff are to benefit from the programme in future (3).

More Nigerian schools and teachers should be given the opportunity to benefit from this laudable programme in French. There is also need to mount such a programme for other Nigerian professionals like lawyers, medical doctors, nurses, engineers, pharmacists, etc.

In line with the foregoing, the French unit of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, offers annually "service courses" in French to about 3000 undergraduates in different faculties, such as arts, social sciences, biological sciences, physical and pharmaceutical sciences. The relevance and viability of service courses in French prompted some other educational institutions like Nnamdi Azikiwe University and Abia State University to introduce them in their respective undergraduate programmes.

The advantages of bilingual education in English and French cannot be overemphasized. Literacy in both languages will enable young Nigerian graduates and professionals to find suitable jobs within and outside Nigeria, and to make a more significant contribution to national and international development.

Conclusion

In this article, we have addressed the need to formulate and implement an acceptable national language policy on French as a second official language in Nigeria. An important vehicle of communication at the national, intra-African and international levels, French is a potent agent of cooperation and integration in Africa, especially in the West African sub-region where Nigeria has always played a major leadership role in various fields of human endeavour. Besides, this language serves as a vital tool for promoting literary studies, socio-cultural interactions and economic activities in the sub-region, as well as for the enhancement of Nigeria's political and diplomatic relations with other countries within and outside the African continent.

The proposed adoption of French as Nigeria's second *lingua franca* will go a long way in fostering international trade, mutual understanding and cooperation between Nigeria and the *Francophonie* community, particularly between Nigeria and France. The knowledge and use of French by Nigerians will therefore promote national and international development.

In view of the foregoing, we recommend that the teaching and learning of French should be made compulsory in our primary and secondary schools across the country. This recommendation tallies with the opinion of virtually all the stakeholders in the French Education sector⁶. For this reason, the study stresses the need to train a more significant number of French teachers for the numerous primary and secondary schools across Nigeria. There is also need to mount different training programmes in French for other teachers and professionals such as science teachers, lawyers, medical doctors, nurses, engineers and pharmacists. Such programmes will give Nigerians the opportunity to become bilingual in English and French and to make a more significant contribution to national and international development.

Notes

1. The focus of this article is on French as a second official language in Nigeria in the new millennium. While discussing the late General Sani Abacha's significant contribution in this regard, the study will not address the issue of his incompetence in governance. We dissociate ourselves from the military dictatorship, corruption and quest for power or personal aggrandizement that characterized his military regime.
2. My translation of the original text in French as seen above.
3. The African countries in question are as follows: Algeria, Benin Republic, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Comores, Democratic Republic of the Congo including former Zaire, Djibouti, Gabon, Guinee, Ivory Coast, Libya, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger Republic, Rwanda, Senegal, Togo and Tunisia.
4. *Francophonie* community is made up of 52 French-speaking countries across the world. Countries like Cameroon and Canada are bilingual in English and French and are members of both the Commonwealth and *Francophonie*. Nigeria should be encouraged to become also a member of the latter.
5. The 6 pilot Universities for the training of French teachers are as follows: University of Nigeria, Nsukka, University of Port Harcourt, University of Lagos, University of Jos, Ahmadu Bello University, and University of Maiduguri. Most of the pilot Universities and Colleges of Education have already started to run a standard pre-degree or pre-NCE programme in French which is sponsored by the French government. All of them make use of the teaching method *Studio 100*(2001), an innovating communicative method which was designed in France by Professor Christian Lavenne *et al.*
6. Among the stakeholders are the following: Ministries of Education at both federal and state levels, French teachers and units in the primary and

6. Among the stakeholders are the following: Ministries of Education at both federal and state levels, French teachers and units in the primary and secondary schools as well as in tertiary institutions across Nigeria, University French Teachers Association of Nigeria (UFTAN), Inter-Colleges Association of French Teachers (INTERCAFT), National Association of French Teachers (NAFT), Nigeria French Language Village (NFLV) and Cercle français (Association of French students). Others are Franco-Nigerian Educational and Socio-cultural Organisation (FNESCO), Ambassade de France, Alliance française (AF), Centre for French Teaching and Documentation (CFTD), and French Centre.

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