

Triglossia: A Sociolinguistic Reality in Nigeria Contemporary Society

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Abstract

Nigeria as a multilingual state predisposes Nigerians to accepting the need for languages with varying spheres of use. This paper examines the Nigerian triglossic situation against the background of the acquisition of different languages for varied purposes. Nigeria clings to internationalization of English as an official language and this has excluded indigenous languages from achieving that prominent status. Indispensable in the contemporary Nigerian communication system are the mother-tongues, the vehicular language, and the imported language, that is the English language. English has weakened Nigerian indigenous languages by marginalization; exclusion, attitudes towards someone who speak only indigenous languages is to regard him as a useless person in the society. The position of minority languages depends on their ethnoglossia. The official language, the lingua franca, and local language cannot compete with but complement one another. So, a triglossic occurrence has to be recognized. It is, therefore, a privilege. The sociolinguistic imperative for nationwide communication under existing conditions equally makes triglossia a necessity.

Keywords: endoglossic, exoglossic, imported language, indigenous languages, lingua franca Nigeria, triglossia

1. Introduction

Language makes us human. It is a general feature of African countries that have thrown off the stress of colonialism, they choose their former colonial languages (English, French, Portuguese) as either their national or

official language or both. All African states are densely multilingual. This assertion is corroborated by Mansour (1993). In Nigeria's Middle Belt, for example, there are approximately 400 distinct minority languages within the region but of these number, at least

205 have fewer than 400 speakers. Many are unstudied, undescribed, unwritten, and unknown to outsiders while some have as many as one million speakers. However, none is addressed in the government national language policy. The foregoing is a clear demonstration that the government national language provisions crafted and reviewed severally undermine the use of "minority" languages in Zimbabwe.

Nigerians have largely and unconsciously been subjected to trilingualism. This has been the norm thereby making Nigerians accept the need for languages with varying spheres of use (a vernacular language, or mother tongue; a contact language used for local relations; and a lingua franca for regional communication). The lingua franca is either the English (an imported language) or Pidgin English -which is sometimes transformed into a creole.

The assignment of functions to different languages especially in any given multilingual society usually leads to the elevation and development of some languages, especially (colonial) European and many a time, majorities of indigenous languages in Africa. However, indigenous minority languages spoken by small size or numerically inferior groups of people are undermined in formal domains of life such as education, administration, trade and commerce, Babarinde, (2008). This issue of the marginalisation of minority languages has raised fears of potential language death and endangerment (Krauss 1992; Brenzinger 1998; Matsumura 1998).

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), people have a right to 'mother-tongue education,' unfortunately; many African countries cannot provide it to all their citizens. Nyika (2008) observes that the multilingual situation of African countries has necessitated the sociolinguists and other language scholars to examine problems associated with language planning and policy, with greater attention given to issues such as language choice, the domination of exoglossic languages, and the marginalisation of endoglossic languages, especially minority languages. This paper, therefore, sets out to examine the sociolinguistic situation in Nigeria multilingual society with a view to defining the condition necessitating their various status.

2. Triglossic situation in Africa

Talking of language situation, here, our emphasis is on the sociolinguistic aspects of imperialism as reflected in the linguistic geography, language use, and language attitudes of many Africans. As a result of the 'Berlin Conference' (1884-1885), most present-day, that is, post-colonial African countries are truly multilingual and multinational. In fact, according to Capo (1982), some African countries like Nigeria shares eight languages with the Benin Republic, sixteen with Cameroon, three with Chad and five with Niger. Language planning includes the need to determine which languages will serve as the medium of education and government. In Nigeria, for instance, language planners accept that additive multilingualism is

desirable and incorporate this into the curriculum. Exoglossic languages such as English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish were retained as a means of neutralizing conflict among various ethnic groups, but in the end, those who master them have become new elite.

Languages have to serve many functions: to express identity and solidarity, to communicate practical information, to educate children, to provide a medium for technical knowledge, and to facilitate political and governmental exchange. The intermediate languages have been found to be lacking in technical terminology, for instance, which makes them less valuable as *lingua franca*. Thus, other languages pick up that purpose.

Heine (1979: 25) in Ohly (2004) presents a typology still valid today, classifying African states according to the language policy conducted by the given government. In general, nations have been divided into endoglossic and exoglossic units. Endoglossic states employing a native language as a means of nationwide communication, are further arranged into

- i. state conducting an active endoglossic policy such as Egypt with Arabic, Somalia with Somali or Tanzania with Kiswahili, and
- ii. state without an active endoglossic policy such as Botswana with Setswana, Lesotho with Sesotho or Rwanda with Kinyarwanda

Unlike all the cases in the (a) category, states in (b) category like Nigeria utilize the former colonial languages

in administration, education, and mass media although the bulk of their population communicate through the dominant African languages, called national languages. Their survival depends on their ethnoglossia.

States conducting an exoglossic policy employ no African languages in official functions. Heine (1979) recognizes four types in this regard:

- i. states in which a national language is spoken by the majority and serves as the ordinary means of communication (e.g., Bambara in Mali, and Wolof in Senegal), but where a language not spoken by the majority as a mother tongue is the sole official language (e.g., French in those two countries), or Siswati in Swaziland and Kiswahili in Kenya, while English is the official language in those two countries;
- ii. a state with one dominant national language, where the domination is numerical in character. In Angola, for example, 31% of the population speak Umbundu, and 48% speak Hausa in Niger. However, the official languages, respectively, are Portuguese and French in those two countries;
- iii. a state with several dominant languages. In this situation, the African languages are in a dominant position as a result of the numerical force of their speakers or their official regional function. For example, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba serve as regional official languages and *lingua francas* in Nigeria, but nationwide, English is the only

official language of the state. In Zimbabwe, Chishona and Isindebele serve as official regional languages, while English is the sole official language of the state; and

- iv. a state without dominant languages, such as Cameroon, where 286 languages/dialects are in use while only some speech forms have been recognized as languages par excellence. Bamileke has 12% speakers countrywide and Duala has 7%. French and English are in official use.

The presentation of Heine's typology has been necessary to show the emergence of an apparent diglossia conditioned by the language policy of a state authority. Furthermore, the presence of an imported language seems to be vital - even imperative. Consequently, according to the social allocation of function in most cases, the given imported language represents a high variety, language confronted by an African language that constitutes the low variety. However, such an observation would be wrong. With Cobarrubias (1983), quoting Fishman, high variety might be a different language with or without a corresponding nexus with a low variety, which in turn may be another language used by a linguistically different community. Low variety would stand in a non-competitive complementary relationship to the High language. Heine's (1979) typology suggests that verbal efficiency in communication demands bilingualism from an African, that is, to have mastered an

imported language and to be able to apply the given African language with competence. Therefore, it does not mean that the African language in question is linguistically on a low level.

African language surveys visualize the multitude of languages spreading across the continent. This raises the question of what is happening to tens or even hundreds of languages used daily in an African country, confronted by a bilingual system. Alexandre in Heine (1979:27), taking into consideration linguistically heterogeneous states, proposed their division into countries (a) with *langues immédiatement utilisables* (languages with directly usable applications) and (b) those without. He also assigned to the given state mostly one African language, e.g., Bemba in Zambia fell into the (a) category, while Wolof in Senegal was categorized as (b). The affiliation of the states in question to the Anglophone and francophone zones was taken for granted.

3. Nigerian indigenous languages in the face of triglossia

Meanwhile, indigenous Nigerian languages are either involved in a rationalization process or are following natural courses of sociolinguistic events. Rationalization is realized through language planning. This means that every state is empowered to control some language functions according to promotion-oriented rights on the use of a language by public authorities at national, provincial, or municipal level (Cobarrubias 1983:76). The foregoing is currently being practised in some states like Kano, Imo and Lagos where

Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba respectively are used in legislative matters in their respective houses of assembly. At national level, Nigerian still clings to the ideology of internationalization, that is, the establishment of the former colonial language (language of wider communication) as official language. As a result, Nigerian languages have been excluded from achieving such a prominent status. Even in the case of nationalization / vernacularisation, i.e., the adoption of an indigenous language as the national language as adopted by the 1989 constitution, an imported language (English) still function as co-national language. This view is justified by the different views of scholars on the definition and interpretation of the term "a national language" which according to Elugbe (1990) is interpreted into three possible independent descriptions. According to his interpretation, the national language may mean Nigerian indigenous languages including Nigerian Pidgin (even though its cultural characteristics may be difficult to pin down). Secondly, national languages may mean those languages, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, on account of their numerical strength that are granted the status of national languages on the strength of nationhood, and national unity. Thirdly, a national language may be a language which is national in terms of its geographical spread, that is, its location is nationwide. one may be misled into thinking that English is a national language. Though it is being taught nationwide and has the whole country as its geographic constituency, its ethnic constituency is small and amorphous.

Although the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), now African Union (AU) often called for the implementation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) resolution on the value of mother tongue education, Nigeria still justifies the exclusion of smaller (minority) languages by using numerical and economic arguments. The lifeboat theory serves as a paraphrase: the available places are limited.

Nigeria generally constitutes a conglomeration of ethnic groups which for either minorities or non-minorities, all of them have at least toleration-oriented language rights. Most endangered are the minoritised languages of minorities, that is, those that are simply ignored by state authorities and totally exposed to their sociolinguistic environment and its rules. For example, there are over 400 distinct minority languages spoken in Nigeria's Middle Belt. Of these, at least 180 have less than 400 speakers, and the majority of these languages remain completely undescribed. The speakers of the remaining languages range between 200 and 1million. There is no government policy towards these languages at all (Brenzinger 2015).

A specific role plays the push factor -which aims at enforcing language shift from outside, and the pull factor - which tries to incite assimilation wishes among an ethnic group (Tosco 1998: 129). For instance, English is threatening almost all the Nigerian languages to a marginal status. They are unjustifiably discriminated against, so much so that even Nigerians who cannot utter a sentence in English, the language of

colonialist, oppose the teaching of Nigerian languages. Nigerians express a negative attitude towards their own languages and express the wish that their children should be integrated into the use of 'prestigious' English language.

Besides, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba are a threat to most of the minority Nigerian indigenous languages, especially Hausa in the northern Nigeria. By the African standard,

northern Nigeria represents a region of linguistic complexity. It is unique because it is a meeting point of three African language phyla found in Nigeria; the Afro-Asiatic phylum, the Nilo-Saharan phylum, and the Niger-Congo phylum. This area is therefore one of the geographical areas of Nigeria that is richest in the existences. Table 1 below presents a broad scope of the language phyla and sub-families present with a few languages.

Table I: Language phyla and sub-families of Northern Nigerian languages

Phylum	Sub-phylum	Language
Afro-asiatic	Chadic	Hausa, Angas, Bura
Nilo-saharan	Saharan	Kanuri, Teda-Daza, etc
	West Atlantic	Fulfude
	Adamawa	Waja, Chamba, Mummuye
Niger-Congo	Benue-Congo	Jukun, Jaar, Laour, Birom, Tiv, Idoma etc.

At the same time, the Nigerian minorities express a negative attitude towards their own languages and express the wish that their children should be integrated into the national languages.

Language shift may occur as a mixture of radical and gradual death in an obsolescent speech community: a unilingual situation with a dominant L1 may, under the influence of an L2, turn into bilingualism and later towards a unilingual situation for L2 or dominance L2 (Dimmendaal 1998). Language shift has been observed especially among members of the younger generation of Nigeria, where OwonAfra-speakers enter the Yoruba option, for example, while Holma become part of the Fulfulde speech community.

Minorities whose languages are minoritised undergo external

administrative pressure. Suppression of such languages by a state authority is the result of national language planning. Nigerian constitution only confers conditional recognition to the three major languages—Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba—to be used for legislative businesses by the National Assembly in addition to English (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, Section 55). However, this elevation has remained only on paper since English is the language normally used for the so-called businesses (Bamgbose 1995). In this way, the other over 450 ethnic languages become endangered. Language shift towards English has involved every Nigerian indigenous language, while Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba have largely successfully resisted the assimilation attempts. Nevertheless, the education authorities suggest that parents use

English in the home. In effect, this will accelerate the death of even the majority and national indigenous languages (Agbede, 2016).

The language of promotion-oriented minorities can also be minoritised. In Nigeria, the use and non-use of indigenous languages as media of instruction depend largely on historical antecedents. In compliance with the language provisions of the National Language Policy, English was established as the sole official language while the major languages were reduced to the status of (passive) national languages. However, language provisions preserve the use of mother-tongues or language of immediate community (LIC) as media of instruction in functional literacy and in Primary 1-3 in lower primary education. After that, only very few or 2% of the indigenous languages are offered as subjects in the higher levels of formal education.

A non-minority whose language has been minoritised can be found in south-south, north-central/Middle Belt, larger part of north-east and north-west for instance. The Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba ethnic groups constitute 25% each of the Nigerian population, while 70% of the entire Nigerians speak English (either the British standard form or the reduced/simplified Nigerian Pidgin English). English is spreading at the expense of Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba (the national languages) and other innumerable indigenous languages which are increasingly confined to the periphery of the country and then to the rural areas as English takes over towns. At present, according to Ezema, (2014) and Yusuf (2015), there

are close to 500 indigenous languages in Nigeria, almost all of them are endangered in one way or the other.

Nevertheless, 58 years after independence, English is still the sole educational language of instruction – without any didactic connections with African languages, that is, the mother tongue of 90% of the learners (Akinyemi 2017).

4. The indispensability of African indigenous languages

To summarize, most Nigerian languages belong to the category of deprived languages, that is, not being used for important social functions, while hundreds of them are being threatened by extinction.

According to Ali and Mazrui (1998), Africans are already well known for their strong tendency towards multilingualism. Throughout history, they have been talented linguists in the pragmatic sense of the word. Unlike much of Europe, monolingualism has never been the norm. The forces of functional complementarity definitely encourage multilingualism. For example, many members of the black community in South Africa are already multilingual in up to five languages (Bamgbose 2000: 40).

According to Mazrui and Mazrui (1998), most sociolinguistic studies in Africa recognize a three-way distinction between

- a) vernacular languages that serve as media of intra-ethnic communication and solidarity,
- b) vehicular languages of inter-ethnic communication and integration like English, and Pidgin, and

- c) official language of administration and national communication (English).

Trilingualism forms part of Nigeria's triple linguistic heritage. That is, generally speaking, an effective social order of communication in the past consisted first of the mother tongue, being the very carrier of the ethnic culture and identity (e.g., Ibibio, Edo, Igala, etc.); then a contact language, a lingua franca which is needed to establish inter-ethnic relations and communication (e.g., English and Pidgin English in the case of the uneducated Nigerian population); and finally, an official language of administration, and education (e.g., English) to enable international and official national engagements.

Indispensable in the Nigerian communication system today are the mother tongue, the vehicular language, and English, the imported language. The functions of the imported language - English and of recent French (see NPE, 2014) - have become entrenched in almost all out-group social domains. Moreover, English, for example, has stultified and weakened Nigerian indigenous languages by marginalising most of them in the education system in particular and in the life of the nation in general. It has been observed according to (Legère 1996b: 66) that attitudes towards someone who knows only African languages are to regard him/her as a useless and foolish person in society. On the other hand, imported languages have also undergone 'nationalisation' with the creation of Nigerian Pidgin English (Maho 2000:30).

The modern elite in Nigeria, that is, politicians and those that assumed former colonial offices in the civil service maintains the imported languages. They are the staff institutions of higher learning and create the mass media, and they comprise the middle management in the still mainly foreign-owned business corporations. These elite cut across traditional ethnic boundaries and have little or no formal organization - thus creating elite closure.

Nevertheless, the elite typically know indigenous languages that are also spoken by the masses (Myers-Scotton 1990:29). Consequently, Nigerian vehicular languages become significant. English play a less persuasive role in the daily lives of people than elsewhere, thereby leaving room for patterns of stable multilingualism rather than resulting in diglossia (Brenzinger 1998a). Hence, there has been a tendency for dominant Nigerian languages to gain in popularity and spread countrywide at the cost of numerous minority languages. In this respect, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba are often called 'killer' or 'oppressing' languages that purposely threaten other indigenous languages. Most speakers of other languages, in fact, abandon their own language voluntarily, recognise another language as being superior and more useful. Multilingual urban centres are typically pluralistic. In the Lagos (southwestern Nigeria with Yoruba), Onitsha (southeastern Nigeria with Igbo) and Kano (Northern Nigeria with Hausa), speakers of minority languages are normally competent in regional lingua

francas such as Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba as well (Legère 1996b: 51). For instance, over 80million people speak any of the three languages as second Nigerian language besides English or French language.

Nigerian languages facilitate the process whereby the elite successfully penetrate the masses and whereby the masses have adequate access to the elite and are a definite advantage in the quest for vertical integration. As regards fostering horizontal integration at lower levels, lingua franca like Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba in Nigeria are especially important. Horizontal integration concerns the degree to which the masses are in contact with each other and are able to establish a linguistic basis for sustained interaction. Nigerian lingua franca can, therefore, also be said to be involved in the process of socioeconomic consolidation (Mazrui and Mazrui 1998:103).

Mother-tongue is treated as an inborn trait. Consequently, parents often assume that there is no need to teach mother tongue/first language at school since children speak them anyway. Fafunwa, (1976) notes that indigenous language assembles cultural specificities, the little and great tradition, comprising the treasury of the given ethnic group, the cultural wealth which is bequeathed to posterity.

Taking into consideration the social advantages of functional multilingualism, Nigeria's educational planners recognized five categories of languages that are gradually introduced into the school curriculum (Bamgbose 2000: 69):

a. the mother tongue

- b. the language of the immediate community
- c. a major Nigerian language (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba)
- d. English, and
- e. A foreign language (i.e., Arabic or French)

The foregoing has led to the assumption that a trilingual communication scheme is easy to access in the Nigerian condition, although components of such a scheme may have several serious shortcomings. For instance, by following the modernization theory, governments propagated the belief that there would be a homogenization and harmonization of society by introducing English as a neutral language. However, instead of a re-classing of society, the effect of introducing this extra glossic language was just to re-stratify society. Thus, a new elite has been formed, whose knowledge of English determines their position of economic and political power (Beck 1995). In Nigeria for example, 40% of the total number of children have a rudimentary exposure to English at best; therefore, they are automatically disqualified from any activity requiring knowledge of the official language. Latin (2012) argues that data based on socioeconomic indicators from 40 African countries demonstrate no obvious statistical relationship between language diversity and economic growth. Even African literature in English constitutes a major contribution to contemporary literature in English only.

Lingua franca are criticized chiefly on the grounds of their

underdeveloped terminology. In several science subjects at secondary school level, they are still unable to replace English, for example. Even more important is the slow technicalisation of vehicular languages since they have to play a central role in the development of the whole community and should be viewed as an integral part of community's intellectual life (Webb 1995: 87). They also contribute to the decay of smaller language groups. For example, some critics even insisted that indigenous languages had become a scapegoat for the declining standards of education from the language of hope it turned to language of empty promises (Salami 2010: 256).

The position of minority languages depends on their ethnoglossia -the communicative character of a language or variety. It is the expressive power of the language, that is, its communicative strength determined by the number of functions it performs and the quality of such functions relative to the social structure of the speech community. The speakers may choose to use the language for reasons of ethnic identity economic power, or the social organisation of the speech community. It is assumed that the environment does not endanger ethnic groups that are numerically strong. In Nigeria, for example, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba are spoken by about 65% of the population of 180million, (Bamgbose, 2006). They are also Nigeria's national languages. However, learners' attitude towards Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba is negative because they do not contribute to their career advancement (Haruna 2016).

Literature in Yoruba (42million speakers) in Nigeria is well established. It reflects a creative strategy that makes art amenable to popular dissemination media like television, radio, and newspapers, which now accommodate poems and short stories (Bodunde 2013: 10). Yoruba is also taught as a subject from the beginning of primary education while the other subjects (e.g., mathematics and sciences) are taught in Yoruba in the experimental classes for a six-year duration.

It may be assumed that, in Nigerian society, trilingual, quadrilingual, and even multilingual communication is common. However, regardless of the circumstances, bilingualism creates a problematic situation. The acquisition of a second language might lead from an incipient stage of bilingualism to a progressive stage, an integral stage, a regressive stage, and a residual bilingualism in relation to L1 (Sommer 2012).

Thus, as Legère (1996a: 68) observes, a two-language policy which does not implement additive bilingualism is geared towards subtractive bilingualism, that is, the given Nigerian language would become a second-class language, inferior to English, good only for informal communication.

5. Summary and Conclusion

At present since the official or Language of Wider Communication (LWC), the lingua franca, and local language cannot compete with each other, they should form a complementary environment in a functional multilingual situation. Therefore, a triglossic occurrence has

to be recognized. The lingua franca plays the most important role because downward accommodation, that is, vertical integration, seems to be the rule in Nigeria. For example, in Nigeria, the elite learns enough pidgin to communicate with the masses. Elugbe and Omamor (1991), and Adegbija (2011) observe that NPE is classified as an indo-exogenous language since it links English (an exogenous language) to the numerous Nigerian indigenous languages. According to them, a large portion of NPE lexicon is taken from English being its superstrate language, while its structure and function are akin to Nigeria's indigenous languages, its substrate languages. As already mentioned, African languages which facilitate the process by which the elite successfully penetrate the masses and the masses have adequate access to the elite are a defining advantage in the quest for vertical integration. In performing horizontally integrative functions at the lower level, Nigerian vehicular languages serve as the main languages of trade unionism and organized labour (Mazuri and Mazuri 1998: 103).

According to Adama and Giant (2010), minority languages are often exposed to the ethnicisation of politics in a pluralistic society. That is, different political parties often tend to derive popular support from specific ethnic groups. Governments often try to activate defensive minorities, for instance, through folklorisation that enhances the cultural performance of such minorities. Meanwhile, self-contained strong minorities employ cultural and linguistic islandisation, thus avoiding language shift or any

predominant influence from the outside.

A triglossic situation may emerge by sociolinguistic necessity. For example, English functions as the official language, pidgin functions as a semi-official language and accepted lingua franca, while Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba serve as local or national languages, although only in colloquial use. Therefore, in the official language model, English forms the upper layer, pidgin the middle layer, and indigenous languages the lower layer. Thus, a triglossia model (English-Pidgin-local languages) is realistic.

Triglossia, taking into consideration the Nigerians' inborn gift for language acquisition, is therefore a privilege. On the other hand, the sociolinguistic request for nationwide communication under existing conditions makes the implementation of triglossia (a linguistic situation in which three languages coexist with complementary functions) a necessary step towards communication at the national level in order to achieve national integration and national development.

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