

PERCEPTION OF NIGERIANS ON FEASIBILITY OF USING ENGLISH LANGUAGE FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY AND INTEGRATION IN HETEROLINGUAL AND MULTICULTURAL NIGERIA

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to establish the perception of Nigerians on the feasibility of adopting a non-native language as a tool for enhancing national identity and integration in Nigeria. Nigeria is not only heterolingual but also characterized by a complex system that depicts divergent cultures among the members of the different ethnolinguistic groups. This thus necessitates integration that would foster unity. In addition, the issue of national identity is one of the burdens of Nigerians living in Africa and by extension in the diaspora. In order to achieve the primary objective of this study, a researcher-made questionnaire was developed and administered to some five hundred (500) literate Nigerians between September 2015 and September 2016 in all the six geo-political zones of the country. In addition, covert observation was conducted in

fifty (50) towns and villages in Nigeria within the same period by the researcher. The major finding of this study reveals that even though majority of the respondents agree that English can be used as a medium for enhancing communicative unity among speakers of different languages in Nigeria, an overwhelming majority of them did not agree that English can be used as a symbol of national identity in Nigeria. Conversely, considering the way English is spreading in the country, as revealed by the results of the observation, this study argues that English can serve as a veritable tool of integration and by extension national identity in Nigeria without necessarily having any negative incursion on native cultural identity. This can be achieved without necessarily affecting the 'Africanness' of Nigerians living in Africa

Introductory Background and Review of Related Literature

Every group is characterized by some variables that bind its members together and thus the variables could be used as a symbol of identity. Nigeria – a country that has a population of about 182 million people (National Population Commission, 2017) – is heterolingual and by extension multicultural (Abdullahi, 2009). As such, each ethnic group has some features that project each group's basic identity. At the national level however, there is the need to have (a) substance(s) that could be regarded as symbol(s) with which Nigerians could be identified. It should be noted that language can be used as a gateway to national identity. Of interest in this paper is how a non-indigenous language could be used as an instrument of national identity and integration.

Tajfel (1978) describes social identity as that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or

groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership. A nation as a whole is a social entity. In consequence, national identity is characterized by one's attachment to the core values of one's nation in agreement with how other citizens feel inclined towards the nation. Even though national identity is sometimes described to be characterized by common blood, religion, customs and language, it would be difficult for national identity to be described as such in the Nigerian context. However, a nation that is heterolingual and multicultural can fashion its core values, norms, ideologies and history at a particular point in time that all would align with to project national identity. Language can be used as a specific vector to express national identity. According to Iwara (2008:16), nationalist and militant groups all around the world significantly "...identify language with nationality, and to proceed from there to associate both language and nationality with culture and race." This is apposite because language is not only a repository and transmitter of culture but also a symbol with which one's race or affinity with a particular race could be established. In addition, Ndhlovu (2008:139) underscores that "Africa and African identities are often defined on the basis of numerous taxonomies

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including religious, ecological, ethnic, biological, linguistic, geographical and historical terms.” In agreement, Akande and Salami (2010:70) assert that “...language is used, for example, as a symbol of identity or in-group membership.” It should be noted that one's lack of proficiency in a particular language can make one to be categorized in an outgroup category. Whitehead (2011:331) reports that “Gramsci also argues strongly that language allows the development of identity and the subaltern is capable of creating his/her own language identity...”

The exposition made in the preceding paragraph alludes to the fact that language is a symbol of identity. It is argued that national identity that is propelled by the core values of self-actualization and self-reliance is a propeller of national development. But then, the language that should be used as a vector of national identity is also very important in a nation's quest of attaining national development. Oyetade (2015:8) argues that the languages that can promote development “... are indigenous languages of the individual countries of Africa.” But then, he argues elsewhere on the same page that: “... majority of African countries are multilingual and to encourage the use of indigenous languages in education will mean promoting ethnic identity rather than national integration.” Okoh (2016:4 – 5) cited Okoh (1994) asserting that: “Not many nations in the African continent ... can lay claim to any significant measure of mono-ethnicity.” Thus, languages as instruments can reinforce or undermine national identity depending on the ones that are used. A language that is detribalized can enhance national identity even in heterolingual societies. For instance, according to Ayodi (2013:89), Kiswahili as a language that possesses the force of unifying people from divergent ethnolinguistic background has created a “... new form of national consciousness among the inhabitants of each country in Africa, particularly east Africa.” It has succeeded in the diffusion of religion – Christianity and Islam – in East Africa. Religion is also a symbol of identity that can be expressed through language. For instance, Erling et al. (2012:15) report that: “... knowledge of English was even considered to be a positive factor in the way that it allows Bangladeshis to share their culture internationally and help Muslims participate in a global Islamic community.”

In order to find a solution to the use of non-indigenous languages as symbols of, and vectors for expressing, national identity and integration,

Coleman (2007:5) gives example of Pakistan and reports that: “Shamin goes beyond simply problematising the role that English plays in Pakistan and, pragmatically, she recommends a multilingual policy in which competence in English and Urdu would be developed side by side.” This would sustain regional identity via indigenous languages and national identity via a non-indigenous language. Even where English is chosen as a language of national identity in Nigeria, the endonormative version of the language can be utilized to reinforce its uniqueness and 'Nigerianess'. For this reason, Banjo (2012:5) reports that: “... Nigerian linguists argue that since English is now a second language in the country, it should look inward for its own standards of correctness, replacing the old exonormative model with an endonormative one.” Retrospectively, Christophersen (1948:14) asserts that: “And I believe that English, which is already, in slightly different forms, the language of many nations, can be used, alongside with vernacular languages, to express also the spirit of Nigeria.”

English has served as an instrument of integration and national identity even in the United Kingdom. For instance, Iwara (2008:18) reports that English “... is spoken natively by a heterogeneous group of peoples known under the collective name of Germanic peoples and including Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Gaelic race.” Despite arguing that a country that uses a foreign language for domestic affairs as a country that is yet to attain nationhood, Uguru (2008:8) agrees that “... where an individual is more identified by an ethnic language than a national language will make room for ethnicity and unpatriotic tendencies, which are clogs in the wheel of development.” The use of a common language as a unifying force and symbol of national identity in heterogeneous societies has been recorded in so many nations. These include Russian language in the former Soviet Union, English language in the United State of America, Mandarin Chinese in China, Hindi in India, Malay in Malaysia, Bahasa in Indonesia etc. (Iwara, 2008). As for English, its efficacy has made it to be regarded as an instrument for the globalization of cultures (Oyeleye, 2016) thus capable of expressing national identity in heterogeneous societies. This implies that the fact that English can be used as a vector of expressing Nigeria's national identity does not mean that indigenous languages should be relegated. For this reason, Coleman (2010:16) counsels that: “... it is important

that we should not exaggerate the importance of English nor should we undervalue the importance of other languages.” Thus, even when we think that English can be a vector of national identity in its non-indigenous domain, local languages should be allowed to play significant roles in projecting ethnic identity and where practicable national identity (especially in climes where they are adopted as national languages).

Methodology

This study adopted the descriptive research design to conduct a survey on the perception of Nigerians on the possibility of using English as a vector of national identity. Even though the population of the study is all Nigerians (over 182 million people), the researcher purposively selected five hundred (500) people as the sample size of the study. All the respondents have a minimum qualification of a university degree and speak one or more local languages. All the eight (8) items in self-constructed questionnaire entitled natiden 574 were responded to by the respondents. Simple percentage was used for statistical analysis.

Results

Table represents the summary of the responses of the respondent to each of the items on the natiden 574.

Discussion

328 (66%) of the respondents disagreed that English language can be used to project local history. A common history at the national level is a veritable instrument for national identity. Despite the fact that Nigeria has a plethora of ethnic nationalities that have distinctive common histories, Nigeria as a nation began to have a common history from 1914 when the Southern and Northern protectorates were amalgamated. As such, given that Nigerians from different linguistic backgrounds now have a common language which is English (even though there are many Nigerians who lack communicative competence in English), English can be used to project Nigeria's local history. Le Page (1964:14) asserts that: “... the possession of a common language will necessarily give rise to an identity of interest in a community.” The history of contemporary Nigeria is tied to English. This is so given the fact that English was the official language the colonial government used to amalgamate and administer the two protectorates that formed Nigeria. This makes Nigeria to have some common history and experience with other Anglophone countries from linguistic perspective. When the history of Nigeria is linked to the history of Africa, Mazru'i (2005:81) asserts that: “... the history of Africa does

Table 1: Perception on Using Non-indigenous Language for National Identity and Integration

S/N	Item	Response			
		A	N	D	Total
1	English language can be used to project local history in Nigeria	172 34%	-	328 66%	500
2	English language can be used to project local art in Nigeria	181 36%	-	319 64%	500
3	English language can be used to project religion in Nigeria	239 48%	-	261 52%	500
4	English language can be used to project local customs in Nigeria	125 25%	-	375 75%	500
5	English language can be used to propagate local political ideology in Nigeria	135 27%	-	365 73%	500
6	English language has more capacity to propel national identity than indigenous languages in Nigeria	130 26%	-	370 74%	500
7	English language is more viable than indigenous languages in nationalist quests in Nigeria	135 27%	-	365 73%	500
8	English language can enhance national integration in Nigeria	403 81%	-	97 19%	500

not end on Africa's shores." Thus, for Nigeria's common history to be exported to other climes outside Africa, it needs a non-indigenous language as a vessel.

319 (64%) of the respondents disagreed that English language can be used to project local art. Conversely, practical experience reveals that Nigeria's local art have been projected via non-indigenous languages. For instance, when distinctive Nigerian artefacts are presented to non-indigenous groups, they use the lens of their non-indigenous languages to appreciate and interpret the aesthetic value of the substances. An individual that has an in-depth knowledge of the artefacts and the languages of the non-indigenous audience can as well guide non-indigenous viewers toward appreciating the values of the artifacts in non-indigenous languages. Achebe (2012:55) commented on how Africans can utilize non-indigenous languages to project African creative arts thus, "... some of us would decide to use the colonizer's tools: his language, altered sufficiently to bear the weight of an African creative aesthetics, infused with elements of an African literary traditions." Even though English is used in this respect, the English language has been subjected to morphological, syntactic phonological and semantic nativization. Jowitt (2008:10) agrees that such Englishes "... have undergone 'nativization' in their new environments, that they are developing their own 'endonormative' standard that these did not necessarily coincide, nor did they need to coincide, with the 'exonormative' standards emanating from Britain or the United States." The new Englishes are not only owned by their new 'makers' but also serve as symbols of identity that can be used to project indigenous arts.

There was an insignificant difference between those who agreed and those who disagreed that English language can be used to project religion. The term 'local' was deliberately omitted. It should be noted that Christianity, a Semitic religion, and Islam, an Arabic religion, are not necessarily indigenous to Africa. In Bangladesh, where English is a non-indigenous language, Erling et al (2012:15) report how it helped "... Muslims participate in a global Islamic community." Thus, such accounts for the manifestation of the near equal response by the respondents in respect of this item. But, the question is; can a non-indigenous language project African traditional religion? While the writer is of the view that the norms and tenets of African traditional religion

can be presented for consumption in a non-indigenous language, religious rituals cannot be conducted in non-indigenous languages. Grenoble and Whaley (2006:17) assert that the language of religion is always the last to survive extinction thus: "Bottom-to-top attrition ... where the language is lost in family setting and most other domains, yet is used widely in religious and/or ritual practices." The Igbo believe that the only language kolanut understands is Igbo.

375 (73%) of the respondents disagreed that English language can be used to project local customs. This writer is of the view that a non-indigenous language can be utilized to serve as a repository of indigenous folklore values and norms. Even though Araromi (2009:19) agrees that "... learning another man's language entails learning the culture too, for language is culture and culture is language", there are multilinguals that are monocultural. An individual could be multilingual and yet be monocultural. In this case, instead of one to allow the custom of a non-indigenous language to cocoon one, one will in a sense allow one's indigenous language colonize the non-indigenous language. According to Izevbaye (2012:80) "... there is a sense in which it is Igbo that has colonized English through the creative agency of Achebe." Nigerian customs have been practically expressed via the medium of English thus making people who have communicative competence in English identify with such customs just like their non-speaking Nigerian compatriots with high sense of cultural identity. Christophersen (1948:16) predicts that he believes English will live side by side indigenous Nigerian languages to "... serve as a vehicle for a literature through which Nigeria will voice her individuality and make her contribution to a world civilization." This has truly come to pass. Nigeria's individual customs are expressed via the English language for the consumption of a global population. Nigerian home videos project indigenous customs via English subtitles.

365 (73%) of the respondents did not agree that English language can be used to promote local political ideology. There is no political ideology that is greater than engendering unity. People can identify with a political ideology and enhance their political participation in any language. This could be indigenous or non-indigenous. The paramount thing that would enhance inclusion is one's understanding of the language. Batibo (2007:12) reports that given the

heterolingual nature of most African countries and the likely conflict the choice of an endoglossic language policy would generate, most African countries adopted an exoglossic language policy that made ex-colonial languages as official and/or national languages. He asserts that: "Such a national medium was also expected to provide national identity and self-determination for the sovereign state." This work contends that pan-African leaders were able to promote political ideologies not necessarily via indigenous languages. That some African countries are operating without definite political ideologies is not the problem of language but due to deficiency in moral values. In the case of Nigeria, all indigenous languages have rights to political participation along with English at various levels. What may be lacking is the attitudinal will.

Mustapha (2010:61) cited Banjo (1994) who suggested the need for a linguistic rallying force "by which Nigerians from different language communities and diverse cultural milieus can find a common cause and identity and that it is in such a common recourse that they can express their Nigerianness and be so easily recognized." 370 (74%) of the respondents disagreed that English language has more capacity to boost national identity than indigenous languages. This could be true when one considers the fact that an overwhelming majority of Nigerians lack communicative competence in English. This makes English a language of marginalization rather than a symbol of national identity in Nigeria. Pugh (1996:39) argues that: "The degree of competence in a new language has a direct bearing on the sense of ease experienced within a new country..." In our own case, the English speech community in Nigeria is the one that comprises people that share a common national identity. While the proficient are in the in-group, those that are non-proficient are in the out-group. Chambers (2007:120) reports that: "Differential command of languages can lead to mutual disrespect, with perceptions of arrogance on one side and stupidity on the other." According to Iwara (2008:52), "... the colonial language, now raised to a position of prestige, was seen as insidiously undermining the indigenous languages and cultures and threatening them with extinction." In most cases indigenous languages are the ones endangering other indigenous languages. However, no single Nigerian language has the geographical spread and the communicative unity

ability across all ethnolinguistic groups like the English language. This necessitates a multilingual model.

365 (73%) respondents disagreed that English language is more viable than indigenous languages in nationalist quests. Nigeria is at present facing nationalist challenges from different ethnic nationalities. The potent weapon to win intra-ethnic sympathy is an indigenous language. However, any attempt to use a single indigenous language at the national level to project a national nationalist position will generate angst from the speakers of the languages that are not used. Negash (2011:162 - 163) reports that: "... after independence it was African leaders, such as those in Nigeria, who were responsible for the choice of English over local languages. This was done with the intention to de-emphasise ethnicity and build up a sense of nationhood." Ndhlovu (2008:145) reports that the "... role of these ex-colonial languages as languages of African political liberation and quests for economic emancipation under the banner of the 19th – 20th century pan-Africanist and nationalist movements is well documented in the relevant literature ..." He stressed that in Anglophone African countries, English was utilized as the language of mobilization in the fight against colonial rule. It should be noted that even though pre-independence struggle at the national level was done in English, grassroot nationalist mobilization was done in local languages.

403 (81%) respondents agreed that English language can be utilized for national integration. It is evident that English is playing a significant role in national integration in Nigeria. One of the significance of the spread of English language in Nigeria is its potency to engender communicative unity among Nigerians from different ethnolinguistic backgrounds. For this reason Nigerians can claim part ownership to the English language with its continuous spread in the country. This necessitated Davies and Pearse (2002:16) to assert that "... English does not only 'belong' to any specific countries, societies, or cultures. These days there are more non-native than native speakers of English..." Thus, in the case of Nigeria it is the only language that has a wide spread across the country. Commenting on Nigerian indigenous languages, Ofulue (2008:2) reports that: "An indication of the widespread nature of Nigerian languages is that none of these languages is spoken by

up to 50% of the population as a first language.” English is not spoken by up to 50% of Nigerians. However, this writer concurs with Taiwo (2012:4) who agrees that it “... occupies the important position of unifying the linguistically diversified nation and also serving as the link to the external world.” This has worked in Rwanda. For instance, Plonski, Teferra, and Brady (2013) report that: “English gives post-genocide Rwanda a chance to create a modified national identity that eliminates linguistic 'affiliations based on ethnicity'.” Conversely, it can also serve as a language of exclusion. For instance, according to Iwara (2008:52), “Those who could not speak the language of the elite automatically felt a deep sense of inferiority complex that interfered with their innate capacity to achieve.” Thus, instead of this to have a debilitating effect on the members of the out-group, it should propel them to learn and utilize the language thus becoming integrated into the in-group.

Conclusion

No language would have been more viable to be used as vector of national identity and integration than an indigenous language. However, given the fact that no single indigenous language has evolved to the level of being adopted as a national language, English has remained Nigeria's instrument for national identity and integration. This study found that an overwhelming percentage of the respondents are of the opinion that non-indigenous languages cannot serve as instruments of national identity. Conversely, an overwhelming majority of the respondents agreed that a non-indigenous language can serve as an instrument of national integration. Despite these perceptions, this study concludes that English language can serve as a vector of national identity and integration in a heterolingual society like Nigeria. With the rising profile of Nigerian English, one can identify that an individual is a Nigerian when one the deciphers that the individual in question is using Nigerian English thus making the individual a member of the ingroup of Nigerian English. As such it is recommended that no language should be left behind in such context. While the respective indigenous languages are potent for the projection of ethnic identities, English language should serve as a vector of national identity, integration, and by extension, an instrument for global inclusion. Thus it is recommended that Nigerians should be encouraged

to be polyglots based on the extant language provisions in the national policy on education. Linguists should see projecting the survival of indigenous Nigerian languages as a responsibility. This will make English serve as symbol of identity at the national level while indigenous languages engender ethnic identity.

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