

National Language and The Nigerian Translator

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Abstract

The issue of national language is one that elicits diverse reactions among linguists in Nigeria. The lack of consensus of opinion on this issue has led to a situation where the country cannot boast of any national language after several decades of nationhood. This paper revisits the national language question in Nigeria and assesses its implication for the Nigerian translator. The paper asserts that the non adoption of any of the indigenous languages as national language impedes the operational efficiency of the Nigerian translator. It is therefore, suggested that Nigeria as a country should adopt some national languages as a way of boosting the activities of Nigerian translators.

Introduction

Nigeria is richly endowed by nature in all facets of life. The country has enormous natural and human resources. With well over four hundred and fifty indigenous languages, one can also say that the country is not lacking in this rich cultural heritage. In spite of the abundance of these gifts of nature in the land, the country is yet to fully harness these resources for effective growth and the well being of its citizens.

This ugly situation has not only impeded growth in some vital sectors of the economy but also slowed down advancement in some other areas. This explains why several decades after political independence, the country is yet to adopt some national languages to enhance the social, cultural, political and economic growth of this geographical entity.

Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia defines national language as ‘‘one that uniquely represents the national identity of a state, nation, and or country and so designated by a country’s government’’ if a national language represents the national identity of a country, it means that any country that is keen on asserting its independence must be interested in adopting and developing its national language(s).

It is ridiculous that a country as vast as Nigeria with well over four hundred indigenous languages cannot project any language as its national language. For several decades, the rich cultural heritage of the country has been projected to the outside world using foreign languages. The foreign languages are alien to Nigerian culture and as a result, cannot adequately project her rich cultural heritage the way the indigenous languages would do it. The non adoption of some indigenous languages as national languages has not only affected the way her rich cultural heritage is projected, it has also affected the activities of some language service professionals such as translators.

The translator is the professional that makes it possible for a text written in one language to be read in another. Ordinarily, the translator should be translating from a foreign language usually known as the source language into his local language or another tongue known as the target language. A good number of Nigerians are translators but the question is how many of them are translating into their mother tongues?

The chaotic language policies as well as the utter neglect of indigenous language development in the country made people lose interest in the study of these languages. The result is that most Nigerians preferred foreign languages to their local languages. Some of them who are into translation now see English as their first language and another foreign language as their second language. This indeed is a sad commentary on the history of language development in Nigeria.

Given the above scenario, we have undertaken in this study to examine the national language question in Nigeria and the Nigerian translator. In the course of the work, we will review the national language question in Nigeria. We will also find out who a translator is, the working languages of a translator will also be x-rayed. Finally we will take a look at the implications of the national language question on the

Nigerian translator and the development of translation in Nigeria. There will be recommendations and conclusion.

The National Language Question

The issue of national language is one that has generated a lot of interest and controversy in Nigeria. What one cannot say is whether Nigerians really understand what a national language is and the role it should play in the life of any nation. National language is that language that uniquely represents the national identity of a state, nation, and/or country and is so designated and recognized by the government of the concerned country or nation. Some of the national languages are technically minority languages. Again, some countries have more than one national language. Nigeria is a typical example in this regard.

Nigeria is a vast country with well over four hundred indigenous languages (Aziza, 2011:1, Ezeafulukwe, 2015:1). Though three of these local languages (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) have often been projected by the government, none has been recognized as the national language in Nigeria. This implies that Nigeria, in spite of her much touted cultural attainment and her giant status in Africa, cannot boast of any national language that projects her cultural image.

Nigeria is a vast country with thirty six states and a federal capital territory; some of the states in Nigeria are even larger than some African countries. The country is also divided into six geographical zones. It is obvious that this richly endowed country called Nigeria has so much to offer the world culturally. The products of culture constitute the national identity which every country proudly projects to the outside world. It is what makes each country unique and distinguishes it from all the others. Nationals of countries bear this identity and overtly and covertly project same wherever they go; indigenous languages mirror these cultural products profoundly. It is easy to distinguish an Igbo from a Yoruba or an Indian from a Chinese because of elements of their national identities which they bear. The national identity is the integral part of the personality of every individual hence conscious effort is made by those who know to guard it jealously through the preservation of their indigenous languages and national monuments.

In view of the above, it becomes very easy to appreciate the importance of a national language in the life of any country. A country without national languages is inadvertently creating the impression that it has no national identity to project. The question many may be asking is ‘which of the four hundred indigenous languages should be selected as national languages? The answer to this question is simple only if people will be propelled by the sole desire to see Nigeria grow as a country. Everyone would readily agree that Nigeria has so much to showcase to the outside world but discordant tunes will be heard when the issue is the selection of national languages for doing this. Adedimeji (2004) captures the feeling of most Nigerian linguists on this issue when he writes: “Any attempt to alter the status quo, as it is in favour of one of the Nigerian languages will lead to a chain of socio-political crises that will assuredly threaten the cooperate existence of Nigeria.”

The point has to be made that until Nigerians learn to shift ground on some national issues, this country cannot make much progress, South Africa has eleven national languages even though there is a decline in the use of those selected for political reasons (Bernack, 2012:2).

One thing is clear and that is that there is no way all the four hundred indigenous languages can become the country’s national languages. Given the fact that every part of this country has something unique to offer to the rest of the country in particular and the world in general, it is suggested here that each of the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria should identify one language with which to project that which is unique to it. That way, no part of the country will be left out and all the essential ingredients of the Nigerian culture would have been captured. Thus, Nigeria should designate the six zonal languages as its national languages. With proper planning and religious implementation, the six languages could be developed to serve the same purposes other international languages are serving. The positive impact of this development on the other language services such as translation will be enormous. The country and its citizens as well as the professionals in this domain will benefit immensely and communication will be facilitated between the government and the people and across the different ethnic groups.

Who is a translator? The chambers 21st Century Dictionary defines a translator as “Some one whose job is to translate texts, speeches, etc from one language to another especially someone who is professionally qualified to do this.”

According to the above quotation; the job of the translators is to translate texts from one language to another. Epstein (2005:1) sees the translator as “A person who recreates a text in another language, attempting to keep a delicate balance between being so literal that the text sounds awkward and unnatural in the new language or being so free that the text has become virtually unrecognizable.”

The authors cited above highlighted the interesting perspective introduced by Wendy Lesser who compares the translator to a prison guard in the following words “the prison of language is only temporary...someday a merciful guard, the perfect translator will come along with his keys and let us out”

It is very clear that Wendy Lesser knows that the perfect translator does not exist anywhere; hence she ended the sentence with a question mark. The vital perspective she introduced however, is worthy of note. She likened the translator to a prison guard who unlocks the prison to set the prisoner free. This comparison is very apt for just as the prisoner, under normal circumstance, cannot be seen until the guard unlocks the door to his room, the translator uses his professional skills to make any piece of information hidden in a foreign language accessible to his target audience. With the invaluable service the translator renders to humanity, one can safely say that if the world is becoming a global village, it is the translator that illuminates every street in this village. The translator, therefore, is the professional that makes it possible for a text written in one language to be read in another. This implies that at any given time, the translator is working with two different languages – the source language which is the original language in which the text to be translated is written and the target language which is the second language into which the source text is recreated and which is accessible to the target audience. The next question to be answered is, if the translator has two working languages, which languages should constitute these working languages?

The Working Languages of a Translator:

Some experts in the translation industry have given us insight into what should constitute the working languages of a translator. Annie Brisset (2004:340) has this to say:

The task of translation is thus to replace the language of the other by a native language. Not surprisingly, the native language chosen is usually the vernacular “the linguistic birthright, the indelible mark of belonging ‘translation become of reclaiming, of recentering of the identity, a re-territorializing operation. It does not create a new language, but it elevates a dialect to the status of a national and cultural language.

Annie Brisset’s supports by Xiao (2001:1) who says: “When we translate, we should not only focus on the distinction between the foreign language and our mother tongue. We should also pay attention to the numerous features shared by the two languages.”

The two authors quoted above made it clear that the translator has two working languages – a foreign language and his vernacular or mother tongue. It was in realisation of the above that Thriveni (2005:4) advised as follows:

Thorough knowledge of a foreign language, its vocabulary, and grammar is not sufficient to make one competent as a translator. One should be familiar with one’s own culture and be aware of the source language culture before attempting to build any bridge between them.

Thriveni also quoted Goethe as having said:

There are two principles of translation. The translator can bring to his fellow countrymen a true and clear picture of the foreign author and foreign circumstances, keeping strictly to the original, but he can also treat the foreign work as a writer treats his material, altering it after his own tastes and convictions, so that it is brought closer to his fellow countrymen, who can then accept it as if it were an original work.

Whether the translator is adopting the first principle or the second, one thing is very clear from all these and that is, that the translator, under normal circumstances, works for his fellow countrymen and in the language they all know too well-their local languages. The question we asked earlier comes to mind again, how many Nigerian professional translators have any of the indigenous languages as one of their working languages? We make bold to say that no known professional Nigerian translator projects any of the indigenous languages as his working languages. Most of them have English and French as their working languages. This is the unfortunate situation in this large country with a population of one hundred and seventy million people and over four hundred linguistic groups. This means that translation practice, a viable industry with a long history of success in the developed countries, is yet to gain foot hold in Nigeria. So many factors are responsible for this –lack of clarity as to the benefits of this profession to the growth of the country, chaotic language policies and non-chalant attitude of the professionals in the industry.

There has been no concrete step taken by successive Nigerian governments to establish translation practice in the country. There has not been any clear policy in this direction. A bill sent to the National Assembly to give legal backing to the practice of the profession has not been passed after scaling through second reading in 2008. All these show that translation practice is not on the priority list of the government of Nigeria. The government has no clear policy for indigenous language development in the country. This negatively affects the development of these indigenous languages as well as the performance of language service professionals.

The attitude of the professionals in the industry has not helped matters either. The few of them who are seasoned professionals are so engrossed in the day to day activities that give them little income that they have little or no time to give to the development of the profession in the country. The result of all these is that not much is heard about the practice of translation in a vast country like Nigeria in this twenty-first century. A little sacrifice on the part of these professionals could help change the fortunes of the profession in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, if one does not blow his trumpet, no other person does it for him. This is all the practitioners in the industry need to know so as to get their acts together to reposition the profession in Nigeria. The implications of the national language question in Nigeria to translation practice will be examined in the next segment of this paper.

National language question and the Nigerian translator

From the existing literature, it is obvious that Nigeria has no national language. The issue is still very controversial. There is also no clear policy for the development of the numerous indigenous languages of the country most of which are going into extinction due to lack of speakers and lack of proper documentation. The teaching of these local languages in Nigerian schools is very haphazard due to lack of adequately motivated teachers and the pupils and students are either abandoning them or are not giving much attention to the study of these languages.

It has also been revealed that the translator, under normal circumstances, should be communicating to his countrymen in their local languages. It is incontestable that a good number of Nigerians are making a living out of translation but what is however, not clear is whether any of these professional translators is projecting any Nigerian indigenous language as his working language. Given this scenario, it does appear that the Nigerian professional in the translation industry is like the son of man that has nowhere to lay his head. It is rather unfortunate for only heaven knows the height these gentlemen would have attained in

their chosen field had the environment been more favorable for them to grow with their local languages as their working languages.

Perhaps, it might be pertinent to say, at this point that the controversy over the national language issue is an ill-wind that blows no Nigerian any good. It has negatively affected the development of this country educationally, politically, economically, socially and culturally.

It has also negatively affected the development of the language services especially translation. Given the size of this country, its large population and linguistic diversity, Nigeria, with proper planning and effective policy implementation, would have been a fertile ground for extensive translation activities. The present state of affairs has a lot of implications for both translation practice and the development of the indigenous languages in Nigeria.

Professional translators may continue to shun the use of the local languages. This is because the local languages have not been adequately developed and sufficiently popularized to serve their individual and collective purposes. Once languages are planted by nature, they should be nurtured like plants to maturity. Those that are not nurtured go into extinction while those that are preserved and developed become the toast of students both at home and abroad. Hitherto, two international languages –English and French attracted Nigerian students most. Today, the emphasis is shifting to such languages as Chinese and German. This is because these countries understand the value of their languages and put adequate measure in place to preserve and develop them. Given the strategic importance of Nigeria to Africa and the world, if Nigeria had developed and popularized its local languages, some foreigners would have developed interest in studying them.

Translation into local languages may continue to be done by people who are not professionals. In the interim, it is language students employed by radio and television houses that translate for such outfits. They try most of the time but sometimes they carry out these responsibilities in an unprofessional manner.

If things continue the way they are; our local languages may continue to remain underdeveloped. Translation plays a great role in the development and popularisation of indigenous languages. Translators are good at creating new terms to enrich the vocabularies of local languages. They are also professionally equipped to take steps to popularize unknown languages. These, they can only do with languages they work with. However, if government policies do not encourage them to use these local languages, they cannot apply their professional experience to the development of these indigenous languages. This obviously will affect the rate of development of these native languages.

If government attitude towards the development of indigenous languages and translation does not change, it means that Nigeria may continue to search in vain for answers to questions that translation could have provided with ease. As Anyabuikwe (2015:7) observed in a paper he presented during a conference at the University of Ibadan, United States of America and USSR made extensive use of translation during the cold war that raged between them from the 1940s to the late 1980s. Recently, the Czech Ambassador to Nigeria, Mr Pavel Mikes announced that his embassy was undertaking the translation of three Nigerian literary works written by Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Chima Amadi Adichie. These developed countries know the value of translation and they do not hesitate to seek the services of translators whenever the need arises. This unfortunately is not the case with Nigeria that is yet to realize the immense benefits derived from translation, a professional activity that has contributed tremendously towards the social, cultural, political, religious, economic and educational advancement of most nations of the world.

Recommendations

In view of the foregoing, we wish to make the following recommendations

1. Government should put in place workable language policy that will further the course of indigenous language development in the country.
2. Six indigenous languages should be designated as the country's national languages. The most popular languages from each of the six geo-political zones should be part of these national languages.

3. A child should be made to study and acquire communicative skills in three of these languages by the time he completes his secondary education. We had suggested in a paper we did earlier on the ‘National Language Question in Nigeria’ how the acquisition of these three indigenous languages could be achieved.
4. Nigeria should have a body that will be modeled after the French Academy in France to oversee the development of these languages and supervise the operations of the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN)
5. The National Institute for Nigerian Languages(NINLAN) should be given enough financial assistance to enable it to perform optimally.
6. The bill to give legal teeth to the practice of translation as a profession in Nigeria should be passed and signed into law as soon as possible.
7. Government should realize the importance of translation to the socio-cultural and economic growth of the country and take practical steps to tap from the rich professional experiences of translators in Nigeria.
8. Linguists and translators in Nigeria should do all within their power to sensitize both the governments at all levels and the people to embrace the study of their local languages and seek the assistance of translators who have been professionally prepared to make ideas and other valuable pieces of information hidden in foreign languages available to their countrymen at little or no cost.

Conclusion

The work examined the implications of non-adoption of some national languages to the development of translation practice in Nigeria. It was revealed that a professional translator should have his vernacular as one of his working languages. It was also highlighted that the controversy over the adoption of some indigenous languages as national languages impedes the development of the translation profession in Nigeria. It was therefore suggested that to ensure harmony in the polity and fast-track development in all fronts, Nigeria should have six national languages selected from the six geo-political zones of the country. This will ultimately enhance the activities of translators in Nigeria.

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