

THE POLITICS AND ECONOMICS OF THE LANGUAGE POLICIES OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT OF NIGERIA: A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION

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Abstract

Nigeria's ethnolinguistic composition is enriched with three major indigenous languages, three foreign languages and over four hundred minor languages. In view of this, the country needs a visionary language policy to cater for communicative, interactive and pedagogic needs of its citizens. This paper has critically explored the nation's language policies as enshrined in The Constitution and the *National Policy on Education*. The position of French language in Nigeria has also been spelt out. The method of data collection was both through primary and secondary sources. For primary sources, interviews were carried out and for secondary sources; books written by renowned linguists were consulted. The study concluded that there is no specific working document on Nigerian language policy save the few paragraphs in the constitution and the National Policy on Education (NPE). The researcher therefore, went ahead to suggest that a deliberate and working document pertaining the national language policy be formulated and adequate arrangement be put in place for French language to also thrive.

Introduction

For any nation to thrive linguistically there must be a language policy in place. This is especially important in multilingual societies like Nigeria who possess a wealth of linguistic and cultural diversities. This write up will examine the different language policies of the Federal Government of Nigeria both at the formulation and implementation levels. This will be weighed against the backdrop of national development to see how well these policies have fared. The position of the Federal Government of Nigeria concerning the use of French in Nigeria will also be determined.

What is Language Policy?

A policy is a formal statement made by the government of a nation regarding rules governing the conduct of affairs of one or more of their programmes (projects). It is usually contained in a document that has a legal binding on its citizens and is referred to any time there is a dispute concerning the adherence to and implementation of such programmes. Examples are the National Policy on Education, the Electoral Act 2004 and many others. Language policy is defined by Agbedo (2011) as:

What a government does either officially through legislation, court decisions or policy to determine how languages are used, cultivate language skills needed to meet national priorities or to establish the rights of individuals or groups to use and maintain language (p.91).

This means that a language policy is an exclusive reserve of the government. The government is vested with the responsibility of determining how language(s) should be used. That is, it is the government that has the constitutional authority to assign roles to languages in a polity.

Akindele and Adegbite (1999) opine that a policy is very crucial in language planning. They then define a policy as “a government statement on the planned course of action, contained in national documents such as the constitution and the National Policy of Education” (p.77). The responsibility in this definition still rests on the government. Just as the government makes laws to guide the daily activities of its citizens, it has to make definite decisions to regulate language use in the country. The examples of national documents given in this definition are incidentally the ones in which the Federal Government’s pronouncements on language use are enshrined.

In another instance, Agbedo (2015) looks at language policy making as involving “decisions concerning the techniques and use of language and their careful formulation by those empowered to do so, for the guidance of others” (p.280). This involves Applied Linguistics which takes care of the pedagogic aspects of language as well. Both the teaching and use of language has to be carefully guided by the government. In this respect, the government is the only party that is empowered both legally and financially to formulate and implement language policies. When the government has the political will power to do this, there is then a deliberate attempt aimed at language planning.

Types of language Policy

Agbedo (2011) has identified about five types of language policies which are: assimilation, non-intervention, differentiated legal status, unilingualism and bilingualism.

Assimilation

This policy uses measures to downsize one or more minority groups. It is aimed at fostering unity inside a state with the idea that a single language will foster unity in the country. This policy was used by France in all her colonies. Countries that have this policy are: Pakistan, Syria, Thailand, Iran, Iraq, Indonesia and so on.

Non-Intervention Policy

This policy allows the normal rapport between the main linguistic group and the minorities to evolve on its own. The danger in this policy is that, it favours the dominant group which suppresses the others. The minority languages are marginalised and relegated to the background. Countries that practise this policy are Argentina, Angola, Austria, Bangladesh, Cuba, Czech Republic, Germany, Mali, Nebraska among others.

Differentiated Legal Status Policy

This policy recognises a different legal status for a given language and it usually allows the co-existence of multiple linguistic groups inside a state. Here the majority have their linguistic rights secured and the minority rights are equally protected. Countries such as Angola, Croatia, Latvia, Portugal, Spain and many others practise this policy.

Unilingualism

Unilingualism or valorisation of the official languages policy favours one official language which could be either an indigenous language or an international one. Here, measures are used to protect and recognise the other languages that are not chosen to be officially used. Countries that have this policy are: Madagascar, Morocco, Slovenia, Sri Lanka, Tunisia, Ukraine, Voivodina and a host of others.

Bilingualism

This is a policy that favours two official languages. Examples of countries that practise this policy are: Canada, Chad, Djibouti, Hong Kong, Malta, New Zealand, Norway, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania and many others.

There are also such policies as multilingualism and linguistic internationalisation. These are mixed linguistic policies where both local and international languages are recognised as official languages - Nigeria and Ghana are good examples of advocates of such policies (Agbedo, 2011:91-93).

Language Policies of the Federal Government of Nigeria

A recognisable feature of language policies in independent African states is the extreme multilingualism where different functions are assigned to different languages. The language policies of Nigeria are contained in both the Nigerian constitution and the National Policy on Education. These are summed up as follows:

Legislation

Not much is said in Nigerian constitution concerning language policy/planning. The highest thing that has been said in the 1999 constitution is the assignment of roles to English language and the three largest indigenous languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Also, in the *National Policy on Education* (2004 edition), the policy says that “every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment. Furthermore, in the interest of national unity, it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba”. The language of the immediate community is not defined. And the latter part of this section sounds as if Nigeria has only three languages – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (4).

In another section, the policy states the languages that will be used as medium of instruction thus:

The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject. From the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French shall be taught as subjects (p.9).

Other considerations in the policy stipulate that English language and the language of the immediate environment be taught as core subjects in the secondary schools and any Nigerian language that has orthography and literature in it should be used as a non-vocational elective subject at the senior secondary level (p.14).

The above policies concerning the teaching of Nigerian languages are very laudable but have certain impediments. If these policies are however, well executed to some extent, some Nigerian languages will be preserved and less endangered.

Elsewhere, in the 1999 constitution of Nigeria, pronouncement is made about language use, that English shall be used to conduct the business of the national assembly but the state assemblies should use the languages of the immediate environment along with any of the three major languages as well as English language.

Apart from the constitutional pronouncements, there are other efforts made by the Federal Government of Nigeria in planning for languages. They are:

- A) The setting up of the Nigerian Educational Research Council (NERC) now Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) which produced curricular for primary, Junior and Senior Secondary schools in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.
- B) The establishment of the National Language Centre later known as the Language Development Centre which has also contributed its quota to the planning of languages in Nigeria. According to Agbede (2015), this body has “produced four manuals of Nigerian orthographies covering twenty languages, a quadrilingual dictionary on legislative terminologies (in English, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba), Primary Science Terminology in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba in Colleges of Education (285 – 286).
- C) Another step taken by the Federal Government is the establishment of the National Institute for Nigerian Languages in 1993. This institute has been established “presumably (sic) to train teachers in local languages and carry out researches into different aspects of Nigerian languages” (Agbede, 2015:285). This is a welcome development. This institute was established as “an apex institution for research, teaching, documentation, co-ordination of studies and production of graduate teachers in Nigerian languages” (Guardian, 2015). This institute is saddled with the responsibility of awarding testimonials, certificates and diplomas as well as degrees to persons who complete their courses of study there. In fact, it is the only institute that awards certificates in the three major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) both as first (L1) and second (L2) languages.
- D) The establishment the French village in Lagos State to aid Nigerian and non Nigerian students studying French to improve their proficiency in the language is another practical step taken by the Federal Government of Nigeria to help in language development and communication and interaction with our neighbouring Francophone countries.
- E) The establishment of Arabic centre in the Northern part of Nigeria is also another step taken towards language development.
- F) The Nigerian National Curriculum for Senior School Certificate Examinations is another milestone. In the National Examinations Council (NECO) Syllabus, six Nigerian languages have a place. They are: Edo, Efik, Hausa, Ibibio, Igbo and Yoruba languages.

The Economic and Political Implications of the National Language Policy

The National Policy on Education stipulates among other things that a child must be taught at least two Nigerian languages. Among this two, one must belong to the three

major languages (other tongue) which must be different from his own. This teaching of the Other Tongue (O.T) is compulsory only at the Junior Secondary School (JSS) level. This implies that after the JSS level, students can drop them if they like. There is therefore a tendency to forget the languages soon after just as they forget French and Arabic soon after. They will not be able to perform communicative activities in these languages again. It is also interesting to note that since this pronouncement came into being over two decades ago, there is no little or no implementation. This is partly due to the fact that there is no legal backing to enforce the implementation; and partly due to some economic factors.

Politically, the teaching of the Other Tongue (O.T) may be badly politicised. This is because there is a strong tie between political and linguistic domination. Thus, Jubril (1990) opines that,

The issue of the Other Tongue teaching and learning will be badly politicised. Two or more states, for instance, may enter into an agreement to exchange Other Tongue teachers and thus effectively isolate the third major Nigerian language. Alternatively, a state may teach or not teach a specific other tongue in bad faith so as to accelerate or undermine its emergence as a national language (p.113).

The fear of politico-linguistic domination will hamper effective implementation of this aspect of the policy.

Economically speaking, no policy, no matter how laudable it is can be viable without financial backing. Adopting of such languages as the Mother Tongue (M.T), Other Tongue (O.T) and even a foreign language like French for pedagogic purposes entails a lot of financial implication. The training of teachers, development of orthographies and production of textbooks in more than a hundred languages in Nigeria for different stages of learning attracts a lot of spending and flexing of financial muscles. This may not be feasible for a developing country with lean financial resources.

The Efficacy of the Language Policies as it Affects National Development

Is there really any language policy in Nigeria? If there is how workable or efficacious is the policy? This is a multibillion dollar question that is rhetorically asked by many linguists today. This is really a cause of concern. A quick look at what some scholars have to say on the matter will suffice.

Some linguists consider the language policy statements of the Federal Government of Nigeria as mere on-the-marble political pronouncements with no intentions to fulfil them. Agbede (2011) described it as “noncommittal on the part of the government” (p.101). Elsewhere he (Agbede, 2015) agrees with Emenanjo that “Nigeria does not have a national policy on language because she does not consider

languages important in the planning, sustenance and overall development of the Nigerian polity” (p.284). To him, there is only a “glib clause in the constitution which stipulates the use of the three major languages in the conduct of the business of the National Assembly” (Agbed, 2011:108). If not for the general or is it specific pronouncement in the constitution and the National Policy on Education about language nothing officially has been done in terms of formulation of concrete policies on language.

To Akindele and Adegbite (2005)

What is indeed regarded as language policy in Nigeria is not contained in any official document on language(s) in the country. Instead, it derives from incidental occurrences of language provisions in official documents on policies and education, e.g. *The Constitution and the National Policy on Education*.

This is still in agreement with what Agbedo and Emenanjo have said and I concur with their observations. In essence, there is no working document specifically designed by the Federal Government of Nigeria.

Despite the absence of a working policy document on language(s) in Nigeria, linguists have been making judicious use of the two documents that have clauses in them concerning language. How effectively these provisions have been carried out is the headache of many linguists. For example, as regards the language of immediate environment to be taught and used in teaching in the primary schools, Agbedo (2011) rightly pointed out that “the frustrations which a teacher faced (sic) with a class populated by pupils from variegated ethnolinguistic backgrounds may most likely compel such a teacher to abandon the mother tongue education policy in preference to English” (108). This happens mostly in urban schools where there are pupils from mixed ethnolinguistic backgrounds. In some cases, even the teachers saddled with the responsibilities of teaching have varied ethnolinguistic backgrounds. In such a mixed linguistic milieu, how feasible is it for the language of the immediate environment to be taught or used to teach?

Another hurdle or impediment to the implementation of the policies is the dearth of specialists in the three major languages as pointed out by Agbedo (2011). Even where there are teachers, for the pupils/students to be learning three or more languages (mother tongue, other tongue, English and probably French) they encounter some cognitive and pedagogic difficulties (p.108). Some students may end up losing interest in education as a consequence.

The Status of French in the Nigerian Language Policy

The pedagogic system of the ecolinguistic milieu of Nigeria follows this structure: first language (L1) or mother Tongue (M.T) → second language (L2)

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which mostly follows as ESL (English as a second language) third language (L3) or FFL (French as a foreign language). In between L1 and L2 is what is called the other Tongue (O.T) which should be one of the three major languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. If one is to construct a linguistic ladder for Nigeria, French will be the third or fourth step on the ladder.

Officially speaking, the third edition of the National Policy on Education (1998) as re-echoed by Agbede (2011) stipulates specifically that “for smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria, and it shall be compulsory in all schools” (Agbede, 2011, p.106). Three things stand out in that pronouncement. They are that:

- i. It is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. This is to aid smooth interaction with our neighbouring Francophone countries such as Benin, Niger, Chad, Cameroun and so on. This is in the spirit of good neighbourliness.
- ii. French shall be the second official language in Nigeria. This may happen in the near future as even the pronouncement is futuristic.
- iii. French shall be compulsory in all schools. This is another declaration of intent which may likely be actualised in the future.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, we have looked at the language policies of the Federal Government of Nigeria which are contained in both the *National Policy of Education* and the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Within these documents, the pronouncements on language are only for pedagogic and legislative purposes. The case of French is another matter all together. It can best be described as a mere expression of desire or to say the least wishful thinking on the part of the Federal Government for now.

As for the development of Nigeria as a nation, I agree with Agbede (2011) that “it is only when a language policy which confers linguistic empowerment on the generality of Nigerians through the instrumentality of their respective mother tongues is put in place” can it be expected that a decision to accord official status to the three macro languages – Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba will not meet with stiff resistance (p.166) for now, it is still a mirage.

Recommendations

The researcher wishes to make the following recommendations towards an effective and realisable language policy in Nigeria:

- 1) The Federal Government of Nigeria should, through the Linguistic Association of Nigeria (LAN) co-opt linguists of great repute from the six

- geo-political zones of Nigeria to draft a working language policy for Nigeria which will determine a national language as well as accord status to all the languages of this nation.
- 2) A demographic data that is sustainable should be taken every five years to ascertain the position of language groups in Nigeria. This should be done even when real census (head count) is not done.
 - 3) More teachers should be trained to teach Nigerian languages. This will aid the teaching of indigenous languages.
 - 4) Some of Nigerian languages do not have literatures in them. More books should be written in and on Nigerian languages.
 - 5) If French is actually a desirable language for every Nigerian, concerted efforts should be made in its teaching and learning.
 - 6) This work is recommended for further research. More research on this subject will eventually bring out a working and workable language policy in Nigeria.
 - 7) A deliberate effort should be made by the Federal Government of Nigeria to work out a language policy. A specific amount should be set aside every year in the national budget to plan and implement language policies. Failure to plan means planning to fail.

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