

The Role of Nigerian Translators in Promoting Nationhood and National Consciousness

ODIZURU ITEOGU

Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria.

Abstract. Language is doubly regarded in this paper as a psycho-social phenomenon relevant to every national development. It is in this context that this write-up has tried to examine the language question in Nigeria and how intellectual leadership through translators can contribute to the resolution of the raging controversy over selecting or creating a lingua franca for Nigeria's multi-ethnic society.

Sofar, Nigeria has made attempts, sometimes feeble or distorted, to devise an indigenously derived lingua franca. Three (3) national languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) out of five hundred and twenty two (522) local languages were selected with the intention of eventual selection of one of them as an interim measure to promote nationhood and national consciousness. Despite protests by minority groups and GUOSA language experiment, not much progress seems to have been made to several logistic and political factors.

In the interim, academic and professional translators registered with the Nigerian Institute of Translators and interpreters (NITI) should be co-opted to provide intellectual leadership by translating major works of Nigerian major languages. This will surely promote intercultural understanding among Nigerians, perhaps reducing the mutual suspicion of ethnic dominance among the major groups.

The 21st century should witness more concerted efforts towards a resolution of the language question and building a strong foundation for nationhood and national consciousness. Language is a major vehicle of transmission of cultural ideas, values and belief and a tool to

stabilize or destabilize any political arrangements, especially in potentially unstable emerging democracies of the so-called third world nations of Africa.

Keywords: Issues, Nigerian Languages, Role, Translators, Nationhood, National Consciousness.

1. Introduction

Language has been conceived in several ways by experts depending on their own concepts of it. For example, Kelly (1969) says that "in considering language, psychologists have concentrated on two of its facets, treating it either as an aspect of human behaviour or as a factor in social activity". His second view of language is that it is a "skill or social activity". Therefore, language could be regarded as both a "psychological and social phenomenon needed in the socialization process of the child. On his part, David (1987) sees language "as unique due to its ability to capture the extensive spread of human thought". In other words, language acts as a purveyor of human thought and its effect on all the possible outcomes of human interaction. Obi-Okoye (2002) quoting David (1987) shares the view that "language appears to be the single most important endowment of human kind as a means of understanding ourselves and our society and of resolving some of the problems and tensions that arise from human interaction".

Therefore, language plays a major role in promoting human understanding and mutual

respect among races and nations. Thus, the promotion of human understanding is even more urgently needed in a multilingual society. Nigeria needs to give due regard to language in the ECOWAS sub-region, being an important player in the socio-political and economic development and control in the west African region which is massively occupied by French-speaking countries such as Niger, Cameroon, Benin, Togo, Gabon, Burkina Faso, Coted'Ivoire, Guinea, etc. In the consideration of French language study, the Nigerian situation is more complicated if we consider the overwhelming presence and impact of English (the nation's official language) and the necessity for getting translators involved in promoting national understanding and stability. This is in addition to the privileged position of the majority languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) considered as national languages on the language curriculum in secondary schools. In the midst of this multilingual situation, Nigeria's language problem is likely to take more time to resolve by all stake-holders, policy-makers and implementers interested in promoting the nationhood of Nigeria and national consciousness among its citizens, a pre-condition for a hastened development of our country.

2. Review of Literature

In the midst of the apparent confusion of terms, it is evident that Nigeria is yet to devise a lingua franca. A lingua franca is a commonly and internally derived (endoglossic) mode of general communication in any nation. What Nigeria possesses may be categorized as constitutionally accepted languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) and English (the official language). This has created a problem of how to devise a lingua franca. This has made Oyedola (1998) to explain that the multi-lingual make-up of Nigeria has thrown up difficult options in the attempt to select one of the more than 300 languages spoken in Nigeria as the lingua franca, considering that a lingua franca must be indigenously derived. This inability is based on sensitive issues related to the choice of a lingua franca in a country where the fears of ethnic subjugation are too obvious and almost palpable. In the case of Nigeria, there

is the suspicion that the choice of one local language as the lingua franca of the country might probably put speakers of the other local languages at a disadvantage.

Ajlade (1994) quoting Hansford (1976) writes that "the multilingual Nigerian situation is more complex than normal due to her past history of colonization. According to him, this has led to a situation where about 300 languages were made to co-exist forcefully in one territory by the colonial administrators. This researcher avers that for the purpose of communication, a common language for administrative convenience had to be chosen fast by the colonial administrators who needed to communicate with their subjects in the most efficient manner, hence the ascendancy of English Language in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, no one doubts that there is a language problem, a situation which has obliged linguists and policymakers to seek a solution to the problem of multilingualism. Das Gupta (1968), Elugbe and Emenanjo (1990) corroborate the view that many new political entities are based on tribal attachments by segmental groups more than their ties with the countries. Emenanjo (1990) opines further that cleavages have developed but asks how this situation is managed in developmental issues of the nation. Emenanjo (1990) further explains

Perhaps ...ninety percent of four people in both urban and rural areas are untouched by their alleged Communicative role of English... I should also point out that no artificially-developed language will or does qualify as a national language in Nigeria.

This quotation is a reminder of the difficult obstacle towards deriving an indigenous lingua franca for Nigeria. Apart from the WAZOBIA experiment, there was a second effort. The second attempt was the GUOSA artificial language, a language developed by one Mr. Alex Igbineweka, widely reported by federal electronic media. But criticisms killed the experiment. For example, Emenanjo (1990) says again:

GUOSA was not considered a natural language because in a natural language, an infinity of sentences is possible. In case of GUOSA not even Mr Igbineweka himself is a complete dictionary

of the language since he constantly has to toll away at expressing a new Idea In GUOSA.

This meant that GUOSA was an experiment that died before it could take off. Other failed suggestions ranged from the WAZOBIA to pidgin and the Ife six- year experiment with Yoruba language carried out by Fafunwa in 1974. Fafunwa's experiment was a bold step, but the experiment failed because there was no official backing.

On the part of the Federal Government of Nigeria since Independence (1960), attempts have been made toward the evolution of a lingua franca in Nigeria. Then, if we accept Dunstan's position (1969) that a lingua franca is a language spoken by at least seventy five percent of the populace and backed up by a legal approval, English may not qualify since less than this percent of Nigerians speak it and it is not indigenous to the country.

At best, English is an official language to Nigerians. As Dunstan (1969) says, "the question of the number and inter-relationship of Nigerian languages has been raised several times... but no claims are made for the status of any Nigerian language". Of course on the part of the federal government it has used the instrumentality of education to tackle the problem of a national language.

For example, the *National Policy on Education* (1977, '81, '96' and 2004) has always recommended the study of the three (3) national languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) at varying degrees and different levels. But English continues to be both a compulsory subject and language of instruction and public discourse, whereas French and Arabic remain optional subjects at school. But critics have criticized the retention of English as Nigeria's National Language. For example,

Simpson (1978) says that:

Only very educated Nigerians have a fair chance of knowing it. Although Nigerians know their mother tongue the fact that the bulk of administration and education presuppose a good mastery of English and no other tongue does not encourage either competence in or use of mother tongue. Most educated Nigerians assume wrongly that they are bilingual in English and the mother tongue.

Arising from the above problems, Simpson emphasizes reasons for a national language (Lingua franca) and they include (i) national consciousness and pride (ii) Cultural dynamism (iii) physiological equilibrium (iv) efficacy and meaningful communication. The summary of Simpson's proposal boils down to one conclusion: let Hausa language be chosen as Nigeria's lingua Franca and his reasons are threefold:

(i) Since Hausa has relatively fewer dialect, its learnability will be enhanced over and above other major languages (ii) Hausa has a greater number of Nigerian speakers not of northern origin and (iii) Hausa has greater influence outside Nigerian borders.

However such scholars as Emenanjo and Osaji (1990) share the view that "since each of these great traditions (languages) is numerically and ideologically strong enough to support separate and large scale socio-cultural and administrative integrations their competition within a single politic makes for rather constant internal tension and for inter-ethnic disunity". In summary this problem highlighted by Osaji and Emenanjo concerning the WAZOBIA "concept assumes that any language chosen as the national language must be politically neutral. Unfortunately, there is no politically neutral language in Nigeria today, and this point sets aside Simpson's unguarded choice of Hausa language out of the three existing national languages. Interestingly, the same Emenanjo and Osaji (1990) despite their conviction, list factors (some of which are quoted here) that should guide Government in evolving a lingua franca for Nigeria:

The population of speaks with age occupation and class distribution

Location Geographical political and social boundaries

Present status: any evidence of change in status, decline increase;

Literature: Oral and written tradition, use in educational institutions, Political, religious and media use.

But these factors can be associated with each of the present national languages. In another study, Emenanjo and Olagoke (1990) argue that ethnic and political prejudice may inhibit the selection

of a national language, just as they denounce the teaching of foreign languages in Nigeria. They posit that learning a second Nigerian language would metamorphose into a solution of the national language problem. However, this researcher doubts this very much because not many Nigerians go to school for learning or for other reasons. A large population of illiterates is still found outside the school system despite the current Universal Basic Education programme that contains an adult education component.

Another school of thought favours a simultaneous development of the three national languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) and English language in the hope that English would prevail eventually. The leading proponent of the possibility of English becoming Nigeria's lingua franca is Prof. Ayo Banjo who believes that the long encounter between Nigerians and English language is enough reason to be optimistic. Banjo (1996) offers one or more possible scenarios below.

According to him, the English Language is fully neutralized in Nigeria and is on its way to becoming an indigenous language in the country, and in time may well assume the status of the mother tongue of some Nigerians. Should that happen, Nigerian English would become a strong candidate for the status of official language and lingua franca, hence putting a stop to the feuds among the three WAZOBIA languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba). He adds that Nigeria may join Denmark, Norway and Sweden where English is widely spoken without making it its national language. As he puts it English is a second language (L₂) in Nigeria because following the development in India one could envisage a time in the future when English would share the status of official language with one of the country's indigenous language. Many Nigerians, according to him would wish to see an official language that is indigenous.

In all of the above, Banjo (1996) seems to share the gradualist approach of Bamgbose towards evolving a lingua franca, implemented in stages. However, Banjo (1996) points out that "Bamgbose's advocacy of a gradualist approach is based more on the processes for the choice of an endoglossic lingua franca (choosing a local language) as opposed to a process that will lead

to an exoglossic lingua franca [choosing a foreign language].

Moreover for long, fears have been expressed over the feasibility of operating many languages in Nigeria, formally or informally. Banjo and Christophersen (1996) have expressed these same fears over the possibility of operating a trilingual or even quadrilingual education, all in the attempt to evolve an acceptable lingua franca for Nigeria in the years ahead.

Another argument by Ezikeoiaku (2002) is that "the Nigerian situation shows that there is no real lingua franca for the whole country, the nearest to one being Nigerian Pidgin English; however, there are regional lingua franca. Hausa in the North, Igbo in the east and Yoruba in the west, all three are languages spoken by about 80% of the total population of the nation, whereas minority languages are spoken by about 20% of the entire population". Brann (1986) has categorized Nigerian languages thus:

First Group: Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba are decamillionaires, languages spoken by more than million people (demolects). Second Group: The centimils or languages spoken by more than 100, 000 people (or ethnolects). Fourth Group: Languages spoken by less than 100, 000 people.

This classification shows clearly the complex nature and layers of the language problem in a multi-lingual nation such as Nigeria. Definitely, the search must continue in order to build up relevant knowledge in the area of language policy and planning in Nigeria. This search will and should include finding out the role of translators in recreating a new nation in which local languages, literatures, religious beliefs as components of non-material aspect of the conglomeration of Nigerian cultures, receive considerable attention of government and researchers.

3. Translators and National Development in Nigeria

Translators may not readily come to mind as agents of social-cum-cultural and even political integration, but in a multilingual milieu, such as Nigeria, their role and importance must not be

overlooked. Translators too are purveyors and promoters of international peace and understanding between nations, intercultural communication, and exchange of ideals and ideas for which each society is known. Let us examine briefly the possible roles of translators in promoting peace and understanding between and among the disparate ethnic groups that dot the Nigerian landscape. Several areas are highlighted in this write-up: Literature, language and history of the Nigerian people, parliamentary communication, intelligence-gathering, etc. The roles of translators in these areas are aimed at promoting nationhood and national consciousness in Nigeria through mutual understanding and respect of our various cultures, ethos and common aspirations.

One, in Literature, indigenous literature, there are major examples: Igbo literature, Hausa literature, Yoruba literature and others. References are made here to literary texts written in Nigerian languages. Like it happened in ancient Europe where works were translated from Latin and Greek into several other languages of the continent earlier considered vernacular by Roman authorities, Nigerians who are trained translators can and should be involved in multilateral translations of literary texts (written by or about Nigerians) from English into several local languages. No doubt, this approach offers Nigeria an avenue for mutual understandings feeling of togetherness/national consciousness and appreciation of other people's cultural values and belief systems.

Two, in the area of language, as in literature, translators can render service through extensive translation of language texts into other Nigerian languages, in order to assist fellow compatriots who may wish to study and speak other languages of the nation. Today, Nigerian children are taught foreign modes of communication (English, French, Arabic, Italian, Russian, Chinese, etc), why can't we also encourage the teaching and learning of other Nigerian languages other than our mother tongue (MT)? For instance, in the context of teaching the Idoma children to speak Igbo language in the same way we use English to teach French language to Anglophone students,

this could be replicated in the effort to teach Nigerian children local languages other than their mother tongues. This was the expectation of the authors of the National policy on Education (1977-2014). It must not be ignored any longer by policy implementers.

Again, translators can promote unity, peace and mutual understanding by translating historical texts of other ethnic groups. For example, the history text by Prof A.E. Ayandele (1974) *The History of the Ijebu* (1850-1950) which is a well-researched work on the history, psychology and philosophy of Ijebu of South West region of Nigeria could be translated into Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa etc. This will be a clear attempt to understand some critical characteristics of the Ijebu sub-ethnic group in South West Nigeria. Indeed, there are important historical documents on every ethnic group in Nigeria which should be translated into key national languages. This is with a view to creating peeping holes into epic moments in the historical experience of the Nigerian people, an effort that may provide an avenue for all the speakers of the languages to realize and appreciate the similarities in their socio-political experience and worldview through the ages.

Another area in which translators may be needed in a large number is parliamentary translation. This is about translating proceedings of the National Assembly and the State Houses of Assembly into national languages. The Nigerian constitution allows for the use of local languages by house members (law-makers) during working sessions where facilities are available. The intention is to involve the populace in activities of law-making. Of course, the practicality of this recommendation depends on funding by government authorities at all levels. If parliamentary proceedings are translated, either way, into English or national languages, (Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba) citizen would have access to this document in times of need in addition to enhanced awareness of government activities. Also, there is a compelling need for intelligence agencies in Nigeria to work with trained translators in intelligence-gathering to collect vital information and data in the areas of security, technology industrial espionage, etc for the benefit of national development.

The world economy has gone a full circle in transforming the productive sectors into a type of knowledge economy through the ICT revolution. Surely, Nigeria needs experts in technical translation to translate notable innovations that may help Nigeria to transform her industrial base and thus create more jobs to tackle the frightening spectacle of unemployment.

4. Conclusion

In this discourse, Nigeria is recognized as a multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious nation in which the language question (choice of a Lingua franca) remains a knotty issue since the 1914 amalgamation of the Lagos Colony with Southern and Northern protectorates. Even though four (4) languages, out of about five hundred and twenty two stand out, namely: English, Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba, the struggle for relevance and supremacy remains a fierce one among them. The struggle for linguistic supremacy among the big league languages in Nigeria as already mentioned above calls for intellectual leadership from the university community and related institutions in order to avert possible political instability if one language was arbitrarily imposed on the country. No one is left in doubt that such an imposition could lead to a political implosion that has the potential to lead to a major crisis. Some scholars such as Banjo (1990) believe that it is better to concentrate on developing English language. Others, such as Elugbe, argue that it is better to undertake a simultaneous development of English and Nigerian languages.

Finally, it is being argued that translators working with English, Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba languages can help to avoid a situation where a forceful selection of any of the national languages (Igbo, Hausa or Yoruba) could become a destabilizing factor hindering national integration in Nigeria. Certainly, the minority language groups are not likely to accept any imposition of a lingua franca chosen from the so-called national languages (the big three: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba). Therefore, there is a

compelling need to involve the highly-priced skills of translators in promoting nationhood and national consciousness in Nigeria in the face of current destabilizing socio-political and economic eruptions in the 21st century Nigeria.

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