



41

# Journal of Nigerian Languages and Culture



Volume 11, No 1 March, 2009

ISSN 1595-4730

Published by  
Association for promoting  
Nigerian Languages and Culture

**Journal of Nigerian Languages  
and Culture (JONLAC)**

ISSN 1595 – 4730

Vol.11 No.1

March, 2009.

Published by  
Association for Promoting Nigerian  
Languages and Culture (APNILAC)

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Printed in Nigeria by:  
**SAN PRESS LTD.**  
182 Agbani Road,  
Enugu, Enugu State  
08033169079, 08051399666  
E-mail: sanpressenugu@yahoo.com

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## NIGERIAN LANGUAGE POLICY: THE ELITE AND EDUCATEDNESS

BY

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## Abstract

*English language plays very significant roles as national and official language in Nigeria. It is also the language of educational instruction and its proficiency is attached to academic excellence and job preference. It is a preferred and a frequently used medium of communication among the elites to the neglect of the indigenous languages. Also proficiency in English language has become a main criterion for judging an educated person. However, the concern of this paper is whether the English language can adequately express the Nigerian indigenous culture since language is a vital means of expressing culture.*

## Introduction

Human language could be described as man's major means of communication. Though, it is not only human beings that are capable of communicating, communication through language is peculiar to human beings. The Encyclopedia Americana describes language as the faculty and ability possessed by normal human beings and by no other species of using a spoken or written utterance to represent mental phenomena or events. Even though, some of the lower animals like chimpanzees have recorded some success in acquiring some of the properties of human language, their higher linguistic proficiency is however so immature and unformed. Rene Descartes (cited in Adeniyi, 1999:2) observed that;

It is a very remarkable fact that there are none so depraved and stupid, without even excepting idiots, that cannot arrange different words together, forming of them a statement by



which they make known their thoughts; while on the other hand, there is no other animal, however perfect and fortunately circumstanced it may be, which can do the same.

Bollinger (cited in Araromi, 2005:15) defined language as a system of vocal auditory communication using conventional signs composed of arbitrary patterned sound units and assembled according to set when interacting with the experiences of its users. Similarly, Bloch and Trager (cited in Adeniyi, 1999:1) conceived language as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by which a social group cooperates. It can be interpreted from these conceptions of language that whatever signs that would serve as or would form components of a language is arbitrary and has to be agreed upon by the language community before it would form part of the vocabulary of that community. Also, the arbitrariness of the symbols or patterned sound units implies that there is, normally, no intrinsic and necessary connection between the symbols and the objects that refer to.

Language is very paramount to human existence. Apart from the fact that language functions primarily to communicate human ideas, there are other important functions it performs. The transmission of shared knowledge, customs and traditions would be practically impossible without language which is employed to control, change and shape our environment. According to Adeniyi (1999:7-9) language is used for expressing emotions, social interaction and for national or cultural identity. The role of language in cultural transmission and preservation cannot be over-emphasized. Despite the uniqueness of language to the human species, there exists variations in human language and the major cause of this can not be divorced from the cultural differences among human societies.

Owing to the heterolingual nature of the Nigerian society, English language plays the role of the National and official language in Nigeria. It is also the major means of passing instruction in the formal educational institutions. This prominent role played by the language has accorded it a significant place among the Nigerians. This is evident in its frequent use and preference to any of the indigenous languages among the educated elite. It is now a major criterion of judging an educated person. But can the English language adequately express the Nigerian indigenous culture since culture is expressed through language? Is education equivalent to oracy and literacy skills in English? These questions form the basis of this study.

### Language and Cultural Heritage

Language and culture are inextricably interwoven. Language embodies culture. Oderinde(2005:4) described language as one of the indices or markers of culture. He identified four components of culture which language cuts across;

- (a) Creative component, which concerns a people's literature.
- (b) Philosophical component, which concerns ideas, beliefs and values of a people.
- (c) Material component, which has to do with artifacts in its broadest sense (i.e tools, clothing, food, medicine, utensils, housing etc)
- (d) Institutional component, which covers the political, social, legal and economic structures erected to help achieve material and spiritual objectives.

Language serves as a vehicle for cultural transmission. Bello (1999:123) explained that the vocabulary of a language consists of words that are used to refer to objects or things in the physical and social environment of a people. That is, it consists of words that are used to discuss their everyday life, physical things and beliefs. Since culture embodies all these, language and culture could be said to be related because language is an expression of culture. Also, it can be argued that culture ditches language. In other words, a people's culture dictates the types of vocabulary used in their language. Moreover, language enables humans to create culture and to preserve it by passing it from one generation to another.

With this connection between language and culture, it is obvious that the loss of language means loss of cultural heritage. This position seems to be appreciated by the Government of Nigeria since it recognizes the importance of language in the process of education and as a means of preserving the cultural heritage of the society and therefore discuss issues relating to language in the National Policy on Education.

### Language Policy in Nigeria

The Federal Government's appreciation of the importance of language is indicated in the National Policy on Education. The Nigerian Government recognizes the crucial role of language in the educational process and as a means of preserving the people's culture (NPE,2004 sec.1:8). In addition, the government considers it to be, in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother-tongue. In this connection, the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

In line with this, the educational curriculum is structured to encourage the learning of the mother-tongue. At the pre-primary educational level, government aims to ensure that the



medium of instruction is principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community; and to this end will

- (a) develop the orthography for many more Nigerian language, and
- (b) produce textbooks in Nigerian languages (NPE,2004.sec 2:ii)

Also, at the primary educational level, government plans "to see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community and, at a later stage, English.(NPE,2004.sec3:15:4) Though, the phrase 'at a later stage' is not defined in the fourth edition. The third edition of the National Policy on Education clearly states this as follow

- (c) The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject.
- (f) 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.(NPE,1998 sec 17:c&f)

This implies that English language will only be offered as a school subject from primary one to three while it will become the means of passing instruction as from primary four.

One of the specific aims of the secondary school is to "develop and project Nigerian culture, art and language as well as the world's cultural heritage." Therefore at the junior secondary school level, students are to study two Nigerian languages. In selecting these, students are to study the language of their own area in addition to any of the three main Nigerian languages; Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, subject to availability of teachers. These Nigerian languages are listed among the core subjects, which also include English language. Though, the policy is silent on the medium of instruction at this level, it is obvious and evident that English language serves the means. However, at the senior secondary school level, students are to study only one Nigerian language as a core subject.

Despite this declared appreciation of the importance of language as a means of cultural preservation and national unity, English still continues to play a predominant role in many spheres of life in the Nigerian society. This is evident in the fact that apart from the three recognized indigenous languages, English has become our lingua franca since it is our official language of communication, language of politics, religion, education, science and technology. According to Araromi (2005:18) English Language as the official language is the language used in government offices for official meetings and exchange of correspondence. It is the language of the legislature and also recognized in the constitution even though the



1999 constitution allows the use of the three main national languages when arrangements have been made for it.

At the educational sector, English language has been accorded a vital role as a pre-requisite for admission into all tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Without a credit pass in English, no candidate will be offered admission into any of the existing universities in Nigeria. Even at the secondary school level, good performance in English language is one of the criteria for promotion from one level to another.

The pre-eminent position given English language in the Nigerian society may have led to its preference to the Nigerian indigenous languages among the elite and the positive attitudes towards its learning. Parents take drastic measures to ensure that their children have a sufficient command of the language since proficiency in it is seen as prospects for academic excellence as well as securing a good job.

#### **Nigerian Elite, Proficiency in English and Concept of Educatedness**

Language acquisition comprises four basic skills of language. These can be classified into primary and secondary skills. The primary skills described as the oracy skills embrace the listening and speaking skills. The secondary skills which are described as the literacy skills comprise the reading and writing skills. Proficiency in English language implies the adequate acquisition of these four basic language skills. In other words, one is able to listen, speak, read and write in the English language.

It appears that proficiency in English language has become a major criterion for judging an educated person. An educated person should be able to speak English language fluently and impeccably. Education then seems to have been reduced to acquisition of oracy and literacy skills in English language. It is very common for people to doubt and query the claim by a person that he is educated if he can not speak or write impeccably in English language. Once a person lacks competence in English language his claim of acquiring education is in doubt.

However, it is common, in public occasions, to hear the educated elite declare without shame or guilt that they are not fluent in their indigenous languages and would rather prefer to express themselves in English language. People do not seem to condemn this, rather they applaud it and see it as effect of education (schooling)

The acquisition and use of the indigenous languages appear to be facing a kind of erosion among the Nigerian elites and their families. These elites speak to their children only in English language. Ejide (2001:45) reported that some ethnic groups are on the verge of

cultural extinction because most of the economic and academic elite from such groups living outside their ethnic domain deny their children access to their primary language by fostering only English in their homes and these children attend schools where only English is the medium of instruction.

But the fact remains that education transcends literacy and oracy skills. The acquisition of these language skills might be an aspect of education but do not wholly represent education and educatedness. Thus a person cannot be judged to be educated only by his ability to speak, read and write well in English language.

### Conclusion

One of the reasons advanced in the National Policy on Education for introducing the study of the three national languages is the preservation of the nation's cultural values. What really will enable Nigerians to preserve their cultural heritage is not the use of a foreign language, which embodies foreign culture, but the study and use of the indigenous languages. The indigenous languages need not be relegated since they can perform the same function as the foreign ones. Language is a system in which every item of communication receives its value from the total context in which it functions. Since all languages in the world perform similar functions, one can say that all natural languages of the world are equal. According to Crystal (cited in Adeniyi, 1999:9-10) there is

Nothing intrinsically limiting, demeaning, or handicapping about them. All languages meet the social and psychological needs of their speakers, are equally deserving of scientific study, and can provide us with valuable information about human nature and society. Emenyonu in Oderinde (2005:10-11) has advised Nigeria to learn from India how to promote unity in diversity without necessarily sacrificing the indigenous language on the altar of the English language. He explains that India uses eight other languages apart from English as language of instruction in her universities. India has fourteen major languages of instruction, eleven of which are regional; two are non-regional (i.e. Urdu and Singh) and one is foreign (English language). A few other urban schools retain other foreign languages as a means of instruction (i.e. Persian, Portuguese and French). From all these, he argued that, one can see that India has taken liberties with managing their plurilingual situation without totally suppressing indigenous languages for English.

The argument that the indigenous languages are not adequate enough to express some scientific terms and expressions does not hold water. Since language consists of arbitrary symbols and sounds, coinage and borrowing of words can serve the purpose as long as the



words are widely accepted by the society. Loss of primary language may not have much impact on academic achievement but will ultimately result into loss of cultural values and cultural identity for language remains the vehicle for cultural transmission and preservation. And what's more, what is the essence of an educated man who is not grounded in his indigenous culture. He becomes a "marginal" person lost between two different cultures.

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