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## Nigerian English as a Linguistic Arbitrator

Onyemelukwe, Ndubuisi H.  
&

Ogbechie, Catherine O.

Department of Languages,  
School of Liberal Studies,

Yaba College of Technology, Nigeria

### Abstract

Against the backdrop of the persistent national language question, this study was undertaken to portray and explicate Nigerian English (NignE) as a linguistic arbitrator in Nigeria as a multilingual nation. The objective of the study was, therefore, to intimate the Nigerians opposed to or confused about NignE that all the benefits they associate with an indigenous national language reside in NignE. The study anchored on the sociolinguistic notion of language conflict characteristic of multilingual speech communities as well as that of domestication to explicate the emergence of NignE. The emergence of NignE was analytically traced in the study to be a direct consequence of language learners' habit of transferring source language ( $L_1$ ) features to the grammatical patterns of the target language ( $L_2$ ). Moreover, the study, upon due consideration of the pros and cons of the perennial national language question, recommended exclusive recognition of (NignE) instead of Standard British English (SBE) or an indigenous language as Nigeria's national language and medium of instruction. This recommendation was justified on the impracticability of using a local tongue as such. The recommendation was also justified on the socio-cultural adaptability of the New English which embeds unity in diversity for the nation's multiple ethno-linguistic entities. It was also recommended in the study that (NignE) be standardized to make it suitable for scholarship and formal (national) discourse.

**Keywords:** Nigerian English, National language, Language conflict, Domestication, Source language, Target language

### 1 Introduction

It is no longer a controversy that Nigeria is a pluralistic ethno-linguistic nation. In other words, Nigeria is a multilingual country with 250-500 ethno-linguistic speech communities. The foregoing cursory sociolinguistic profile of Nigeria necessitates the national (official) language question which has ignited a perennial linguistic imbroglio in the country right from its birth as a modern independent nation on October 1, 1960. Before emerging as an autonomous polity, it came into being as a modern but subjugated nation following the amalgamation of its Southern and Northern Protectorates by Lord Fredrick Lugard in 1914 from whose girlfriend it concurrently received its name. See Iheka (2011). Lord Lugard's political action of 1914 is a factor here, because it brought to the fore the ethno-linguistic plurality of the new nation of nations. The action fore-grounded the nation's multilingual nature, because each of the amalgamated protectorates was already multilingual, being an aggregate of several ethno-linguistic nations such as the Igbo's, Yoruba's, Ijaw's, Ibibio's and Itshekiri's in the South as well as the Hausa's, Fulani's, Nupe's, Tiv's and Gwari's in the North.

Lord Lugard, together with other colonial overlords, was certainly aware of the linguistic heterogeneity that characterised the emergent nation, hence, their prompt consensus to impose the English Language on the nation as a lingua franca. To the colonial masters, imposing English on Nigeria was the only wise solution to the glaring linguistic disunity among Nigerians then as now. Linguistic disunity among Nigerians is persistent, because it is natural, being a self-evident

truth, even though it is explicable. That Linguistic disunity is persistent in Nigeria means that it is unacceptable to some Nigerians. Onyemelukwe and Alo (2010) identify such Nigerians as culture enthusiasts to whom Nigeria remains a colony for lacking an indigenous national language, even as English has since been domesticated and adopted as such in the country. To such Nigerians like Ishola (2008) and Adekoya (2008), national development is impossible in Nigeria as long as it retains English as a lingua franca, because they hold that no country has ever developed, speaking a foreign language.

The deduction arising from the fore-going position of the culture enthusiasts is that national development is generally tied to linguistic homogeneity. Nevertheless, it is doubtful if linguistic homogeneity is strictly couched in an indigenous lingua franca, taking the case of the USA into consideration. The USA is obviously a developed multilingual modern nation, but it does not have an indigenous lingua franca, English being alien to it, but domesticated as a national language. It is observed from the USA that a multilingual nation can domesticate and adopt an alien language as its national language. Domestication is necessary, because as subsequently expounded, it serves to input the domesticating nation's worldview (core cultural pathos and ethos) into the adopted language. In other words, domestication settles the curiosities or reservations which some Nigerians have against the adoption of English, an alien language, as a national one.

Against the above backdrop, this study is undertaken to portray and explicate Nigerian English as a linguistic arbitrator in Nigeria as a multilingual nation. The objective of the study is, therefore, to intimate the Nigerians opposed to or confused about (Nigerian) English that all the benefits they associate with an indigenous lingua franca reside in Nigerian English (NignE).

## **2 Theoretical Framework: Language Conflicts in a Multilingual Speech Community**

The national language question referenced in Section 1 is strictly a function of language conflicts typically characteristic of a multilingual speech community such as Nigeria. For avoidance of doubt, a multilingual speech community refers to any human society where many languages compete for popularity of use. In the first place, such a community is made up of multiple ethno-linguistic entities with a language native to each of them. If such a community is an autonomous socio-political territory, its indigenous languages naturally compete with one another to attain national language status, the highest attainable status in the community. The language lucky enough to attain that status leaves others behind to struggle for recognition in various domains of language use.

Domains of language use refer to institutionally recognized occasions of language use such as home affairs, education, office matters and homilies. Languages compete for domains of use in a multilingual speech community, because the domains determine popularity of use in relation to a particular language which in turn determines ethno-linguistic vitality. See Onyemelukwe and Marinze (2012). Hence, the more domains of use applicable to a specific language the more its popularity of use, and therefore, the higher degree of ethnic vitality enjoyed by its native speakers. That languages compete for domains of use translates to conflicting interests among them which substantially mirror the struggle for domination among the ethnic groups which constitute their host community. Ethno-linguistic vitality, according to Giles et al (1977), explains what prompts a social group to assert autonomy, and consequently, carry on as a distinct entity in inter-group relations.

The fore-going sociolinguistic scenario captures the linguistic situation of Nigeria, since it is a typical multilingual nation as already stated. Consequently, the major languages in the country: Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa compete with English for national language status. At other levels, four

of them struggle with other indigenous languages for intra- and inter-ethnic communication as well as other discourse purposes in various domains of use as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Showing the Struggle for Domains of Use among the Languages in Nigeria

Domain	Nigeria
Family	Largely indigenous languages
Playground and Streets	Indigenous languages, pidgin and English
Schools	English and indigenous languages
Churches	English and indigenous languages
Literature	English, Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, Pidgin.
The Military	English and pidgin
Courts	English, Arabic
Public Institutions including those of the Legislative and Executive arms of government	English

Source: Adapted from Ogunye (2012)

Table 1 clearly shows that English attracts the highest number of domains of use (7) in relation to itself, the indigenous languages of Nigeria as well as pidgin, a low variety of English. The other languages attract 2-5 domains of use. Hence, among the reference languages, English enjoys the highest popularity of use in Nigeria as across the globe, having since been acclaimed the most widely spoken language in the world. See Daramola (2012). The expositions emanating from Table 1 also accounts for the second language status of English in Nigeria and many other African countries which no other European language shares with it. For more insights on Nigeria's linguistic situation, see Iwara (2008).

To resolve the conflicting interests of their numerous languages, multilingual countries resort to diglossia, a national language policy function normally construed as a statutory enactment. See Onyemelukwe and Marinze (2012) as well as Akindele and Adegbite (1999) and Ogunye (2012). Relying on diglossia, English, Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa have long been constitutionally assigned the national language status. Not surprising, howbeit, the national language question remains an issue in Nigeria. This sociolinguistic reality in the country demonstrates that diglossia as an instrument for resolving language conflicts is useful only in principle. In other words, the resolution of language conflicts is not purely a legislative matter. It even goes beyond the instrumentality of language policy to virtually depend on socio-political pragmatic imperatives which strongly impinge on language attitude to pragmatically resolve the question.

The practical import of the last three assertions in the preceding paragraph with reference to Nigeria's socio-linguistic profile is that English is the real national language of the country, not as a matter of legislation, but on account of positive (favourable) language attitude of Nigerians to it. Table 1 above clearly demonstrates that English enjoys pervasive positive attitude from Nigerians, since it is spoken in virtually every domain of language use. Even in the family, where the table depicts it to be absent, daily interactional experience in the domain shows that it is spoken, albeit partly, by way of code-switching and/or code-mixing. English enjoys pervasive

positive language attitude in Nigeria, because it satisfies all the criteria for doing so as identified and expounded by Onyemelukwe and Marinze (2012) some of which include provenance, codification and educational relevance, popularity of use and instrumentality.

With particular reference to educational relevance, some scholars like Mackey (1984), Fishman (1996) and Onyemelukwe (1990) are strongly of the opinion that no other language is of greater potential. Mackey specifically asserts that all languages are not of equal educational value and that all languages are equal only before God and the linguist. On his part, Fishman holds that the world in all spheres of life is linguistically dominated by English, regardless of how well established and well protected local cultures, languages and identities may otherwise be. Onyemelukwe does not dismiss local languages like Fishman, but sees nothing wrong with the use of English currently as the language of instruction in Nigeria with indigenous languages serving socio-cultural communication purposes. Onyemelukwe's position is informed by the linguistic notion of domestication which creates room for domesticated English.

The foregoing theoretical permutations in favour of English do not rule out unfavourable argumentation against its implantation in Nigeria as a national language and medium of instruction. Certainly, there are oppositions to the elevated status of English in Nigeria as already signalled in Section 1 above. Hence, the national language question persists, though in principle, only. In pure pragmatic terms, the question has long been resolved in favour of English as has been firmly established in this study, howbeit, not without some lacunae which prompt the study. That the national language question persists only in principle means that the arguments of the opposing side are weak. Opposition to the question is weak, indeed, because it chiefly centres on the politics of the question, namely that English is an alien (foreign) language, and so, does not qualify to be a national language in Nigeria, especially as it is also a colonial language to the country. In other words, nothing short of an indigenous language is acceptable to the opposition as a national language. The opposition maintains this position for two reasons: national development and identity purposes.

As regards the first reason, as already stated but flawed in Section 1, the opposition does not envisage real national development in Nigeria, especially in science and technology, with English as the national language. Regarding the second, the fear is Nigerians' loss of their native (ethno-linguistic) identities as well as being perpetually reminded of her bitter colonial experiences. The truth, however, is that national development and identity realities are beyond the origin of a country's national language. Accepted, native identity incorporates indigenous language, but also embodies other salient socio-cultural variables as identified and expounded in several identity studies such as Giles et al (1977), Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982) and Nwagbo (2013). Besides, this same identity question raises its ugly head in connection with elevating an indigenous language to the status of a national language. Which singular language can be so elevated with no eye brow raised by other Nigerians to whom it is non-native? Is it not for the same reason of identity that Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa are national languages only in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria? Which ethnic group in Nigeria wants its ethno-linguistic identities subsumed in those of groups whose languages are recognised as national languages? The foregoing rhetorical questions clearly indicate that the use of an indigenous tongue as a national language in Nigeria is absolutely impracticable, especially in view of the socio-political implications of doing so.

In the light of the submissions in this section in favour and disfavour of English (SBE) as the national language of Nigeria, there is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria is urgently in need of a formal linguistic arbitrator.

### **3 Analytical Discussion: Implanting Nigerian English as a Linguistic Arbitrator**

English as a prominent national language of Nigeria refers to the Standard British English (SBE). It was implanted in Nigeria, following British colonisation of the country. Thereafter, it became a national language as already explained in this and other studies, but not without being domesticated. Consciously or unconsciously, it was domesticated by Nigerians to transform it into a new English (NE), Nigerian English (NignE). That it has been domesticated means that it has been nativized or Nigerianised. In other words, it has been made home-grown, i.e., it is adapted such that it now incorporates expressions which reflect the socio-cultural nuances of its Nigerian speakers. Simply captured the reality of NignE shows that Nigerians unanimously decided to speak SBE the Nigerian way rather than the white man's way, and by so doing, they created for themselves a new variety of the original tongue which they now hold on to as theirs. See Onyemelukwe and Alo (2010), Banjo (1995, 1996), Adetugbo (1977, 1987), Adegbija (1989, 2004), Bamgbose (1971, 1982, 1995), Akindele and Adegbite (1999), Alo (2004), Mestbrie (2004) and Akere (1978).

Why NignE? Banjo (1996) considers the new English to be a child of necessity. Besides, domestication which gave birth to it is an integral part of language spread and development as stated by Onyemelukwe and Alo (2010). Moreover, socio-cultural differences between native speakers of SBE and its supposed Nigerian speakers account for the emergence of NignE. See Adegbija (1989), Akere (1984) and Medubi (2009). From the perspective of social identity studies, NignE has emerged to help forge a single national identity for Nigerians, which none of their indigenous languages can achieve.

What accounts for domestication as an integral part of language spread and development? The answer to this question resides, satisfactorily, in transfer and interference theories. Both are inter-language theories which focus on mother tongue as a source language ( $L_1$ ) to explain the presence of its features in a target language ( $L_2$ ). In sum, the two theories posit that in learning how to speak an alien language, i.e., ( $L_2$ ), the transfer of  $L_1$  features to the grammatical systems of  $L_2$  is inevitable. Grammatical systems refer here to morphology, syntax, semantics and phonology. For more insights on the theories, see Popoola (2012), Obioha (2008), Lado (1957), Newmark and Reibell (1968), Duskova (1969) and Carl (1980). Ignorance hypothesis also provides some useful insights. See Newmark and Reibell (*ibid.*). The pragmatic import of the foregoing is that NignE incorporates very clear distinctive morphological, syntactic, semantic and phonological features in juxtaposition to those of SBE. See Popoola (*ibid.*) and Adegbija (2004) for details of the distinctive features of NignE.

In the light of the insights emanating from the first three paragraphs of this section it is clear that SBE is no longer in place in Nigeria except as a constitutional provision and formal instructional language. It has long been replaced by NignE, Nigerians' real second language, outside the precinct of formal education. As the real second language, it is employed by Nigerians to achieve virtually all their communication purposes. This assertion is pertinent here, because many, perhaps for the purpose of mere intellectual exercise, still advance the argument that English (NignE) is a foreign language. Harrison (1973) and Bamidele (2001) and a host of other scholars have clearly distinguished between foreign and second languages. While the latter refers to its conceptualisation before now in this paragraph, the former is any alien language which is sparingly in use in a speech community. Hence, it is a gross misconception to classify NignE as a foreign language given its overwhelming popularity of use. Nevertheless, if those who advance the argument have SBE in mind, they are certainly right, because there are surely countable, those who speak it in Nigeria as well as the occasions that call for it.

It is pertinent at this juncture to reiterate the submission of Onyemelukwe and Alo (2010) namely, that NignE is a *sine qua non* for national development and academic excellence, and

consequently, urge the federal government of Nigeria to constitutionally elevate the NE to the status of a national language in place of SBE. In the same vein, the National Council on Education is urged to institute NignE as a subject-language as a replacement for SBE currently recognised in the nation's educational policy so that Nigerian schools can begin to teach and learn it at all levels. In other words, the federal government via its relevant legislative and executive organs should formalise NigE as the national language of Nigeria and the nation's medium of instructions, following Onyemelukwe and Alo's (2010) propositions in this regard and/or those of several other scholars. The formalisation is expected to put to rest, the national language question and its concomitant language conflicts in the country. Nothing in the above recommendations proscribes the teaching, learning and use of Nigeria's indigenous languages. As already suggested, they should continue to serve socio-cultural communication purposes and interpersonal interaction among relatives and friends in families, churches and mosques.

Another crucial reason why NignE should urgently be put in place as a linguistic arbitrator in Nigeria anchors on identity as already signalled. In view of the ethno-linguistic plurality of the country, it is indisputable that a singular ethno-linguistic identity for Nigerians is impossible. That is Nigerians cannot boast of one definite national identity if they insist on having a native tongue as a national language, but the exclusive adoption of NigE as the only national language will certainly guarantee a singular national identity for all Nigerians. Having three is as unthinkable as it is impracticable for obvious socio-political reasons bordering on the fear of ethnic domination. See Oha (2004) for the various dimensions of the fear. This is a socio-linguistic reality every Nigerian must accept, especially the culture enthusiasts, if the nation must move forward. All we need to further do as Nigerians to ensure a strong definite national identity anchored on the implantation of NignE as our national language and language of instruction is to initiate and sustain aggressive mutual enculturation and acculturation across ethnic groups in the country.

At this point, the question of standardization can arise. Is there anything like standard NignE? In pure technical terms the answer is no, but propositionally, the answer is yes. Onyemelukwe and Alo (ibid) are of the opinion that a meticulous harmonization of Banjo's (1996) varieties II and III of the NE will yield the much desired standard form of it. These two varieties are preferred to varieties I and IV for their endonormative value. Varieties I and IV and several other already identified varieties should constitute the non-standard and substandard varieties of the NE as may be delineated the National Language Commission to be put in place by the federal government as proposed by Onyemelukwe and Alo (ibid). The duo has also explicated the imperative procedures for achieving the standardization in their scholarly recipe for realising the pedagogy of NignE. The procedures embody detailed inevitable legislative, political and professional actions. The professional task of Standardising NignE which is the sole prerogative of Nigerian linguists with bias for English Linguistics is no longer a herculean task, because scholars such as Banjo (1996) and Bamgbose (1982) have identified and explicated the criteria for standardisation, namely, mutual intelligibility and acceptability.

Standardization is necessary, because presently there are assorted varieties of the NE and since it must be a subject-language to serve scholarship purposes for more elaborate codification and continual development, evolving a standard form of it is not negotiable. NigE instead of SBE should and must become a subject-language in Nigeria for Nigerians to achieve academic excellence as well as linguistic proficiency, because the intensive formalistic nature of SBE hampers these desirable lofty goals. That SBE is intensively formalistic means that it has inhibitive difficulty level which renders its teaching and learning poorly effective. Linguistic proficiency is desirable, because it guarantees substantial national development according to Akpenyi and Onyemelukwe (2012), but systemic experience in the country's education sector evinces that SBE makes linguistic proficiency elusive to Nigerians.

#### 4 Conclusion

This study has developed and sustained the incontrovertible notion that officially acknowledging the reality of NigE in Nigeria and formalising it by constitutionalising and using it as the only national language and language of instruction is the only realistic way out of the perennial national language question in the country, irrespective of the histo-socio-political fact that SBE, its parent language, is a colonial imposition. All that is needed to realise this noble goal is political will on the part of government to initiate and sustain necessary actions, taking essential clues from scholarly propositions which abound in the nation's academia.

Instituting NignE as a linguistic arbitrator in the country is considered the only option in this study, because the indigenous language alternative multiply experimented in the wazobia fluke in the past is unfortunately impracticable in consequence of which we have no choice but to make a virtue of the child of necessity as Banjo (1996) has reasoned. In making the necessity a virtue, the justification is clearly in the fact that with NigE we can always capture our socio-cultural sensibilities as may be necessary as much as we can with any native language if not more. Moreover, forging unity in diversity among the numerous ethno-linguistic identities in the country is an immense socio-political benefit which Nigerians cannot afford to lose by discarding the NE as a national language and language of instruction.

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