

BEYOND THE LANGUAGE PROVISIONS OF THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY: LOOKING AHEAD

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1.0 Background Issues

Diversity seems to be a hallmark of the Nigerian scape. From ethnic nationalities, who speak diverse languages, to cultural diversities, geographical and topographic variation, religious, economic and educational diversities, Nigeria truly qualifies to be described as a multilingual and multicultural nation. As a multilingual nation, Ethnologue lists over 500 languages from diverse language families including Niger Congo (the largest), Nilo Saharan, and Afro Asiatic, as being spoken in Nigeria. The number of languages in Nigeria is not comparable to the level of language development in Nigeria. Many more Nigerian languages have never been documented or described. Orthographies are the preserve of a select handful of these many languages. With the endangerment of many of these languages, the future survival appears rather bleak. Obviously from the foregoing, Nigeria's indigenous languages rank low in terms of status which is a reflection of the prestige and function of these languages. This conclusion is predicated on the lack of standardisation, juridical status and level of vitality (Stewart 1968).

With that many number of languages in Nigeria, it would be reasonable to expect that there would be policies in place for the improvement of the lot of these languages. Unfortunately, at this point in our national development, we are yet to have a dedicated language policy with the goal of addressing the various language issues – ranging from the number of languages, language in education, language in governance, language use, language vitality, majority and minority language issues, endangered languages, etc. The operational framework on language matters in Nigeria is based on the language provisions of the National Policy on Education, which barely scratches the surface of language related issues in Nigeria.

2.0 The National Policy on Education – Philosophies

For our purposes, we shall work within the ambit of the National Policy on Education (NPE) as stipulated in the 2004 version. Various stipulations are made in the 2004 NPE including the philosophy of Nigeria which states as follows:

- Live in unity and harmony as one indivisible, indissoluble democratic and sovereign nation founded on the principles of freedom, equality and justice
- Promote inter-African solidarity and world peace through understanding

National goals are also enunciated as part of the philosophy as follows:

- A free and democratic society,
- A just and egalitarian society,
- A united, strong and self-reliant nation,
- A great and dynamic economy

- A land full of bright opportunities for all citizens
- The thrust of the NPE as stated in 10a and b include the following:
- The development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen;
 - The full integration of the individual into the community; and
 - The provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels both inside and outside the formal school system.

2.1 Language Provisions of the NPE

Various language provisions have been made in the NPE to address different levels of education – pre-primary, primary, secondary, tertiary, non-formal education. We shall present these provisions as stated within the various categories.

It would be impossible to achieve the goals of NPE as stated in 10a and b without recourse to language, especially with regard to what language will be used in acquiring the various educational and life skills, beginning from the pre-primary, primary, secondary to the tertiary levels. Language provisions were therefore included in the NPE for that purpose. We will take a critical look at some of the language provisions in the NPE to see how they fare. The preamble acknowledges the crucial role of language in bonding and nurturing the society and so states *inter alia*:

- Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of **promoting social interaction** and **national cohesion** and **preserving cultures**. Thus, 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.
- (b) For smooth interaction with our neighbours it is **desirable** for every Nigerian child to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria, and it shall be **compulsory** in primary and junior secondary schools but Non-Vocational Elective at the Senior Secondary School.

2.2 Early Childhood/Pre-Primary Education

In this category, which concerns the early and formative years of the Nigerian child, the following provisions are made:

- **Ensure** that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community; and to this end will;
- **Develop** the orthography of many Nigerian languages and
- **Produce** textbooks in Nigerian languages

2.3 Basic Education

The language provisions for Basic Education are not overtly specified but given 16, those provisions that apply to primary, junior secondary and adult and non-formal education should also be applicable.

Primary Education (19 b)

Several languages are listed under ‘Language’:

- Language of the environment
- English
- French

- Arabic

Further provisions are made for the training of teachers who will teach the language courses, with specific mention of English and Nigerian Languages as well as the language that will serve as the medium of instruction as follows:

- 19 (c) Specialist teachers of particular subjects such as ... Language Arts (in relation to **English and Nigerian Languages**)
- 19 (e) 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
- 19 (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**.

2.4 Secondary Education

The secondary education is split into Junior and Secondary.

2.4.1 Junior Secondary Education (JSS)

The following language provisions have been made:

Group A – Core Subjects

- English
- French
- Language of environment to be taught as L1*
- One major Nigerian Language other than that of the environment to be taught as L2*

*The language of environment shall be taught as L1 where it has orthography and literature. Where it does not have, it shall be taught with emphasis on oracy as L2.

2.4.2 Senior Secondary Education (SSS)

Group A – Core Subjects

- English
- A major Nigerian Language
- Literature-in-English

Observations

- There is a rider attached to the teaching of the L2 as the language of the environment – where the language has an orthography and literature, it is to be taught as an L1; but where the language has neither an orthography nor literature, emphasis is to be on ‘oracy’.
- The English language is ranked higher than other languages; it occupies No. 1 position on the list
- The provisions are also silent on language of instruction at the Secondary School level
- Language/medium of instruction shall be the English language
- Silent on the medium of instruction for the Nigerian Languages to be taught – English or the Nigerian language

From our reading of the NPE language provisions, we can assume that the language of instruction is English. Moreover, in NPE 14c, it is the responsibility of the government to develop orthographies of Nigerian languages, to produce textbooks and to ensure that the medium of

instruction is principally the mother-tongue. How then does the government expect teaching and learning to occur when it has not provided the principal tool, which is the language orthography, to do the work? The development of Nigerian languages is not likely to be sustainable if we continue to prioritize foreign languages over Nigerian languages. In the following section, we shall analyse the language provisions of the NPE in addition to considering the possible consequences.

3.0 Analysis of the NPE Language Provisions

Part of (10a) "... 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".

This phrasing seems to suggest a number of things. The first is the question of 'expediency', meaning that the provision will only be implemented when it is convenient for this to be done. It is not stated at whose convenience – the government, the learner, the teacher, etc.

Secondly, the provision appears to be learner focused – the responsibility devolves on the child, in spite of the preamble which screams, "**Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion and preserving cultures.**"!

Observe however, that in (10b), the adjectives 'desirable' and 'compulsory' are used. French shall be compulsory both in Primary and Junior Secondary Schools. In fact, to underscore the point, 'compulsory' is highlighted in bold. However, with respect to the indigenous Nigerian languages, there is neither '**desirability**' nor '**compulsion**'. Furthermore, in 14c, the preamble states that:

Government shall:

- **Ensure** that the medium of instruction is principally the mother-tongue
- **Develop** the orthography of many more Nigerian languages
- **Produce** textbooks in Nigerian languages

The reality is that many schools, especially those in the urban areas don't 'principally' use the mother-tongue as the medium of instruction – it is English all the way! Moreover, just a handful of Nigerian languages have orthographies, some of which are produced by the language communities themselves. Thirdly, government is not producing textbooks in Nigerian languages! Textbooks in Nigerian languages are produced by individuals. And finally there is the very low status ascribed to Nigerian languages. Notice that even in terms of listing, the Nigerian languages generally are placed at the end after the foreign languages.

The provision is made in (19b and c) that for the following language subjects listed in the Primary School curriculum, Language of the environment, English, French and Arabic, specialist teachers are to be provided. The reality is that specialist teachers, even in English, are not always provided. Often, trained indigenous language teachers are conscripted to teach other subjects in the school because provision is usually not made for indigenous languages in the school timetable.

Although there is the provision in the NPE that the language of the environment shall be used as the medium of instruction in the first three years and thereafter the English language shall be **progressively** used as the medium of instruction. What we find is that English is used as the medium of instruction from the first year of primary education. There is no question of '**progression**' from the fourth year as prescribed in the NPE. It is the English language throughout.

3.1 The Secondary School Curriculum

The Junior Secondary School curriculum specifies the following core subjects:

- English
- French
- Mathematics
- Language of the environment to be taught as L1
- One major Nigerian language other than that of the environment to be taught as L2

It does appear that government has made language provisions without the *force de majeure* to implement them. For instance, even though there is provision for the language of the environment to be taught as L1, it is doomed to fail from the start because there is a rider that states that if there is no orthography then it should be taught ‘with emphasis on oracy as L2’. Without any plan to fill the gap in teacher training, there seems to be no future for the formal teaching and learning of indigenous languages.

The core subjects in the Senior Secondary School curriculum include:

English language
Mathematics

A major Nigeria (sic) language of the environment

It seems that progressively the language of the environment seems to become redundant by the time the students get to the SSS level!

3.2 The Consequences

The phrasing in the NPE vis-à-vis Nigerian languages does not appear to encourage the promotion of Nigerian languages. The reality is that the higher the educational level, emphasis on studying Nigerian languages is progressively whittled away. At the tertiary level of higher education, no mention is made at all of the language of the environment.

Where the Federal Government has some responsibility to implement the language provisions in the NPE, there seems to be implementation fatigue. For instance, the following language provisions are expressly to be prepared by the Federal government:

- ensuring that medium of instruction is in the mother tongue
- developing orthographies of more Nigerian languages
- producing textbooks in Nigerian languages

These provisions are minimally implemented by the government with the consequence that there appears to be near zero relevance of Nigerian languages. Many more Nigerian languages are becoming endangered. Of the over 500 languages spoken in Nigeria, Ethnologue reports that 44 are dying while 27 are in trouble.

3.3 Endangerment Indicators

Ethnologue lists the following twelve as indicators for language endangerment:

- The speaker population

- The ethnic population; the number of those who connect their ethnic identity with the language (whether or not they speak the language)
- The stability of and trends in that population size
- Residency and migration patterns of speakers
- The use of second languages
- The use of the language by others as a second language
- Language attitudes within the community
- The age range of the speakers
- The domains of use of the language
- Official recognition of languages within the nation or region
- Means of transmission (whether children are learning the language at home or being taught the language in schools)
- Non-linguistic factors such as economic opportunity or the lack thereof

When we consider the Ethnologue endangerment indicators vis-à-vis indigenous Nigerian languages, it seems to show that many Nigerian languages are endangered since most fall within the above indicators. In pursuance of better economic opportunity, many speakers, especially the youths, have had to move from local communities where their languages are spoken to urban centres where these languages are not spoken, further reducing the likelihood of using the language. Nigeria is a multilingual nation with many people speaking a minimum of two languages, one of which is a second language. Many indigenous Nigerian languages have negative attitudes within the community, the speakers are usually older, many never receive regional nor national recognition, and many young people rarely get to learn the language at home or in the school, since these languages do not serve as a passport to attractive and enhanced economic opportunities. Languages must be empowered to remain alive before they can be used as media of instruction or taught as subjects in schools. It becomes imperative for our languages to be empowered to meet the various functions they must perform in various societies in order to be relevant. There is also the need to step up the visibility and status of Nigerian languages.

4.0 OPTIONS FOR NPE LANGUAGE PROVISIONS

4.1 Political Will

In order to ensure the effective implementation of the language provisions, a fundamental requirement is the political will that will ensure the survival of Nigerian languages. Political will from the level of the executive, legislative and judicial arms of the federal, state and local governments of Nigeria. If French has been prescribed as the second official language and taught as a compulsory subject, such endorsements should also be made for Nigerian languages by its own government. The government should through the supervision of the various Ministries of Education **ensure** that the medium of instruction is actually in the appropriate Nigerian languages. The government should take steps to ensure the **development** of the orthographies of many more Nigerian languages. The government itself should engage in the actual **production** of textbooks and not rely only on private individuals and NGOS/CBOs with lean resources to do this.

Moreover, government should have clear policies on the languages spoken in Nigeria in order to attract constitutional and budgetary allocations in the scheme of things.

4.2 Other Options beyond the NPE Language Provisions

On a practical level, another option to address the challenges facing indigenous Nigerian language matters is through the utilisation of ICT tools. We should not be solving challenges in the 21st Century with 19th Century tools. Crucially, there is a need to incorporate ICT tools and other innovations into the school curriculum with concomitant benefits. Younger people are more receptive to computer related learning and materials. ICT tools provide wider access and reach in addition to preservation of materials through text digitization. Our folktales, folksongs, myths and legends have more appeal if they are transformed into images and storylines in cartoon and animation genre. If we truly are serious in encouraging the young generation to adopt our indigenous languages and culture, then we must find a way to reach them through the tools that have appeal to them. See for instance this animated film: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4WWuCHTf1_o.

A further option to promoting and empowering indigenous Nigerian languages is through the inclusion of the study of these languages in the educational curriculum. The school or educational curriculum should be reviewed to embrace the introduction of current indigenous Nigerian language materials. For instance, in addition to the inclusion in the Primary and Secondary School Curriculum, there is no reason why the study of Nigerian languages should not be included as part of GST programmes in our tertiary institutions (F. Egbokhare, p.c. 07/03/2016). A Nigerian language policy should be able to address such issues.

Language documentation and collaborative research is another approach to empowering our indigenous languages. According to Ethnologue, Nigeria has over 500 languages. Owing to a number of factors which will not be discussed here, many of these languages are hardly known beyond the native speakers. Extensive and comprehensive documentation of indigenous languages will ensure that the languages are preserved and brought to more visibility. An added advantage will be that the communities will have a better regard for their languages and culture. Language documentation will entail collaboration with communities, governments at various levels, industry, academic disciplines, individuals, funding agencies, interdisciplinary collaboration. The Humanities could, for instance, collaborate with computer scientists and engineers to create innovative tools from and for our languages and culture for sustainability. An excellent example of language documentation and collaborative research can be drawn from the documentation of the dirge among the Uruan people of Nigeria, which had a team comprising the following:

- Community members
- Linguists
- A Musicologist
- Video/Camera operators
- Computer scientist
- Junior Faculty
- Graduate students
- others

All this is exclusive of the enormous benefits of collaboration, some of which include expertise and knowledge drawn from various disciplines, capacity building, experience and knowledge sharing.

These interventions provide the momentum to make the indigenous Nigerian languages more visible and more in the public space.

4.3 Language Documentation, Indigenous Language Resource Development and Cooperative Research

As a result of language documentation and collaborative research between the University of Uyo and other institutions, a number of products have been obtained including,

- Collaborative-data-sharing catalogue of Ibibio LD Products such as
 - Lexicographic Resource – *Nwed Usem Ibibio* (Ibibio language dictionary: Urua, Ekpenyong & Gibbon, 2012)
 - The WALA Initiative
- Speech Resource
 - LLSTI (www.llsti.org)
 - Has led to the first parametric speech synthesis system in Ibibio (Ekpenyong, Urua, Watts, King and Yamagishi, 2014)
- Medefaidrin Project, a critically endangered religious language in Akwa Ibom State with about 20 active speakers remaining leading to the
 - Development of a Web-Talking Trilingual Dictionary (Medefaidrin-English-Ibibio)
 - Recent collaboration with Andrij Rovenchack to develop a font system for the Medefaidrin language (Rovenchack, Gibbon, Ekpenyong & Urua, 2016).
- The documentation of the dirge among the Uruan people of Nigeria
 - Video and audio files of Uruan dirge songs and performance
 - Musical scores based on the dirge from the University of Uyo Department of Music
 - Transcription of the dirge texts
 - Interdepartmental collaboration – Linguistics, Music and Computer Science

4.4 Empowerment

- Primary and Secondary Education
 - ❖ Ibibio has for the past few years been examined by the national examination bodies, NECO and WAEC.
 - ❖ More books for the schools have now been published in all areas – grammar, literature, culture, history, etc. and also used by teachers and students.
 - ❖ On February 21 of every year when the world marks the International Mother Language Day, essay competitions, quizzes, poetry, drama and cultural events are presented and prizes given to groups that excel.
 - ❖ This should sustain and empower the Ibibio language to explore more possibilities in expanding the frontiers of the language
 - ❖ Motivation for other languages to do the same for their own languages.

It is our belief that the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) can and should support the activities that aim to raise the awareness in communities in order to extend the International Mother Language Day programme approved by UNESCO to be held annually on February 21 to many more indigenous Nigerian language communities.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The survival of Nigerian languages should not be left for the government only. It is a collective responsibility involving individuals, communities, governments at various strata, corporate organizations, nongovernmental organizations, educational institutions. More should be done to increase speakers' preference and interest in the Nigerian languages vis-à-vis the dominance of the English language which is a significant factor in the disempowerment of Nigerian languages.

Government should make policies that empower Nigerian languages even as it makes policies to strengthen the English and French languages. Given the prevalence of ICT, utilization of ICT tools should be deployed in making Nigerians more interesting to the younger generation who should be prepared to protect, preserve and sustain our indigenous languages.

Language documentation and collaborative research are trends that need to be explored to make our languages viable for the future. Therefore the need for cooperative work is well-motivated. Empowering our indigenous languages is a collective responsibility and all stakeholders should come together to proffer suggestions on the various alternatives of sustaining our languages.

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