

# Democracy in Nigeria: The Language Challenge

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**ABSTRACT----** *The paper examines the role of language in sustaining democracy in Nigeria. It explores and clarifies the relationship between English and the indigenous languages, as well as the interplay between political communication and democratic participation in Nigeria’s multilingual environment. Using Halliday’s Meta-functions of language as a theoretical guide, the article establishes the functional relevance of language in human society. It argues that the dominant use of English language in Nigeria’s political domain may be detrimental to the growth of democracy in Nigeria. This is based on the premise that democracy as a system of government, requires the language understood by vast majority of people for mass political participation and majority of Nigerians do not speak, read or write in English. It equally notes that pronouncements on language and democratic participation in the 1999 Constitution and the National Policy on Education of the Federal Republic of Nigeria are grossly deficient and are bedeviled with implementation constraints. While the study asserts the power of language vis-a-vis its ability to resolve socio-political tensions, unite diverse ethno-linguistic groups and enshrine enduring democratic tenets in the nation, it however, recommends the re-designing of the nation’s language policy to accommodate the use of more indigenous languages. There should be a continuous development of the indigenous languages alongside the Standard Nigerian English (SNE) to engineer Nigeria’s democratic aspirations. It is by doing so, the nation can maximally explore and benefit from the potentials of numerous languages at its disposal for sustenance of democracy.*

**Keywords---** Democracy, indigenous languages, Standard Nigerian English (SNE), language policy, democracy, multilingual

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language is central to all human activities and plays a pivotal role on any issues relating to social realities and political stability or otherwise. It is employed to create understanding of social and political phenomena. As a means of communication, language is made up of sounds or symbols which enable us to express our feelings, thoughts, ideas, and experiences (Goldstein, 2008). Human language is essentially functional because of the various purposes it serves in the society. Language as an instrument of communication may be used to influence personality, declare war, oppose ideas, intentions and actions; to scatter, condemn and generate violence. It could also be used to entertain, inspire, educate, establish cordial relationship, settle disputes, and make peace with people or communities (Obuh and Omenogor, 2012). Language is also the machinery for propagating individual or group ideology in a democracy. Ideology, according to Clark (2007) is “a set of fundamental beliefs and ideas: that is, the values and attitudes held by any society or community.” In a democracy, individuals or groups have highly disparate ideologies, but are linked by their ability to communicate effectively and connect with people on matters that are important to them through language.

The seemingly inexhaustible potentials of language are continually explored by man to discuss issues of personal, group and national interest. The indispensability of language makes it critical to the people and the system of government practised in the country. However, language can also serve as a source of disunity in a nation if not properly managed. In Nigeria, language problems have led to ethnic and religious tensions that have threatened our nascent democracy. A look at the developmental and political challenges ravaging the nation indicates that they are the result of lack of proper management and utilization of language resources in a multilingual and multicultural Nigeria. In other words, democracy cannot thrive where there are language challenges. In other words, language is the bedrock for any sustainable democracy which must be effectively utilized between politicians and electorate, as well as, between government and the governed.

## 2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The study observes the work of Halliday (1970) to establish the functional relevance of language in human society. Halliday’s (1970) meta-functions of language identify three functional levels of language. These are ideational, interpersonal and textual. The ideational function of language implies that language serves as an instrument for the expression of the user’s real world, including the inner world of one’s own consciousness. It is a means of expressing one’s experience internally and externally. The interpersonal function helps to establish and sustain social relations, while

the textual function of language allows language to link with itself and with features of the situation in which it is used (Ogunsiji, 2001). The language user is able to construct “texts” that are situationally relevant and also be able to establish cohesive relations in sentences of discourse. This underscores the relationship between language and society as affecting a wide range of encounters from broadly-based international relations to narrowly defined interpersonal relationships. Human language is essentially functional because it is used to perform various tasks in the society. In other words, language cannot exist without the society; neither can society exist without language; language is part of society as existence of society invariably necessitates the existence of language with which members of the society interact (Adeyanju, 2002:527).

The divergent propositions of the scholars presented above on the functions of language in human society converge on the acceptance that language performs numerous roles in all the activities in human society. For the purpose of this study, we shall examine the numerous roles performed by English and indigenous languages in Nigeria’s linguistic environment in order to fashion how well Nigeria’s nascent democracy can be developed and sustained.

### **3. LANGUAGE AND DEMOCRACY**

The intrinsic link between language and democracy has long been established. Aristotle of ancient Greek once wrote that “...man is more of a political animal....Nature as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal endowed with the gift of speech” (Politics, 1,2). This gift of speech is the use of language which Sapir (1963:8) defines as “a purely and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols”. Language cannot be divorced from societal activities which include the choice of government run by a nation.

The term “democracy” as defined by Hornby (2006) is “a system of government in which all the people of a country can elect their representatives”. It is based on the principle that all members of the society have an equal right to be involved in the running of the country. *The New World Encyclopedia* (2015: online) defines democracy as “a name given to a number of forms of government and procedures which have legitimacy because they have the consent of the people they govern”. The two main criteria for democracy here are firstly, the officials exercising power have legitimate authority because they have been elected and secondly, the mechanism for changing government is through peaceful and regular elections, as opposed to revolts and coups.

There is no doubt that language is arguably the most crucial in the functioning of democracy. In the words of Ofoegbu (2012:57), “the place of language in any democratic dispensation cannot be overlooked. There is indeed a marriage between language and democracy and the Nigerian democratic scene is not an exception”.

Many monolingual countries such as the U.S.A and Britain have practised democracy successfully because they have no language problem to contend with. This is, however, a contrast to the case in many African nations with diverse ethno-linguistic groups, where language and ethnic loyalty underpin political affiliations. Language problem in some countries has led to civil wars and secession. However, it has been observed that communication power is political power because in it resides the power to influence the beliefs and perceptions of populations, to suggest, persuade, argue, counter argue, satirise and mobilize members of the society. Government and governed need to regularly communicate and connect on matters of national interest. By so doing, the electorate will have a sense of participation in the running of the country.

Linguistic diversity gives room for more people to participate in the democratic process of their country if their language(s) are not neglected. A case study is that of South Africa that has eleven (11) official languages and still makes provision for other minority languages through a scheme by the acronym TISSA (Telephone Interpreting Service for South Africa). TISSA means that, no matter what language you speak, no department of government, no institution of the state, no statutory body can henceforth withhold a service or entitlement on the condition of speaking a language the official did not understand. The aim here is to allow every citizen participate in the country’s democracy no matter the language. A citizen may use the mother tongue (MT) to make a phone call to any of government department which will be automatically translated into any of the country’s eleven (11) official languages. The use of South African indigenous languages has helped to deepen democracy in the country by giving access to crucial information and knowledge that benefit all the people, especially the rural population (Bamgbose, 2005)

The implication of the above is, the more people participate in democracy, the better for the system to grow and mature. That is why democracy is a government of inclusion, rather than exclusion. A language that is not recognised in a democratic setting may have its speakers ostracized. Thus, the people may become aggrieved; feel disadvantaged and cheated within the system. They may decide to rebel against the government and the perceived injustice by not alienating themselves from the entire democratic process. This is obviously not good for democracy, especially the nascent one in many African nations. The fact that democracy in many multilingual nations will survive and thrive if more languages are accommodated for political participation is echoed as we attempt to beam the searchlight of our discussion on the complex multilingual status of Nigeria.

#### 4. LANGUAGE SITUATION IN NIGERIA

Nigeria as a multi-lingual and a multi-ethnic nation faces a number of socio-political problems which can be traced to the nation's linguistic challenges. Linguistic pluralism in Nigeria affects other spheres of life including politics. Scholars have tried to account for the number of languages in the country with varying results. As per the studies by Adegbija (2004) and Ogbulogo (2004), the number of languages in Nigeria counts between 360 and 400 languages. Urua (2004) calculates it as 515 languages, while Essien (2005) computes 400 Nigeria languages. Recently, *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* (2013) totals the number of Nigerian languages in Nigeria as 527. Among this variety of languages, English is the official language. The three major languages spoken in Nigeria are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The diverse languages of the minorities include: Efik, Ibibio, Ijaw, Mumuye, Kanuri, Fulfude, Tiv, Gwari, Igala and Idoma. Even though most ethnic groups prefer to communicate in their own languages, English, being the official language, is widely used for education, business transactions and for numerous official purposes.

The above exposition shows Nigeria as a contraption of linguistic diversity where the indigenous languages co-exist with English, French and Arabic languages. Unfortunately, as numerous as these languages are, so also are the many language challenges confronting democracy in Nigeria. Moreover, the lack of a single national language in the midst of multiplicity of indigenous languages is a major challenge to sustenance of the country's nascent democracy. However, because Arabic and French are of limited use, the article focuses on the roles of English and indigenous languages due to their widespread use in Nigeria's multilingual society.

#### 5. ROLES OF ENGLISH AND INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN NIGERIA

The colonial era marks the beginning of the dominance of English over the indigenous languages and the attendant positive attitude towards it. Many scholars have agreed on the fact that English enjoys positive attitude among Nigerians due to the national and international roles it performs. Jowitt (2000), in discussing the attraction of the English language to Nigerian elites and their belief in the penetrating impacts of the language on professionals and professional development observes:

*Positive attitude to the English language was generally shared by Nigerian elites – lawyers, academics, leading journalists, bishops, army officers during the colonial and post-colonial era, as they hobnobbed at home and sometimes in Britain itself with their British counterparts in the same professions and acquired many of their prejudices and linguistic habits. They were practitioners of highly refined English style both in speaking and writing.*

In the above excerpt, David Jowitt retrospectively reflects on the proud usage of English language by the Nigerian elites, irrespective of their ethnic group or language. This attitude of English is recognized as normal in all advanced sectors of life in Nigeria.

Moreover, despite the Constitutional provision which recognizes Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as three major indigenous languages for national use, they still perform subservient roles to English in the country. Unfortunately, the so called minority indigenous languages are struggling for survival. Sadly too, some are gradually going into extinction as termed by Ogunsiyi (2013) as "Linguicide". As a reaction to this unpleasant language situation and political participation, Agbedo (2005) submits, "In contemporary Nigeria, the advent of colonialism and its concomitant linguistic imperialism produced an oasis of mental poverty-stricken neo-colonialists, and brainwashed ruling elite who hold on to the primacy of English, the colonial language to render the greatest majority of the population as inconsequential varieties in the crucial art of governance." This linguistic arrangement obviously remains antithetical to the noble tenets of participatory democracy.

#### 6. LANGUAGE PROBLEMS IN NIGERIAN DEMOCRACY: A HISTORICAL VIEW

The historical perspective of democracy in Nigeria shows that it has passed through each

and every phase with ethno-linguistic crisis. The country's democratic orientations seem to have been divided along ethnic and language lines. Language problem in our democratic march started during the First Republic when on the 21<sup>st</sup> day of November, 1961, Malam Albatan Yerima proposed motion for the use of our three "major" languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba and other indigenous languages in our institutions of learning by the Federal Government of Nigeria. He was supported by Mr.G.D.O. Eneh who agreed that only a national language will promote peace, unity, and national development in Nigeria (Ofoegbu, 2005). The decision triggered oppositions and criticisms from members of the so called "minority languages". One such was credited to Chief Anthony Enahoro as cited in Maledo (2012:162) who said:

*...as one who comes from a minority tribe, I deplore the continuing evidence in this country that people wish to impose their customs, their languages, and even more their way of life upon smaller tribes ....My people have a language, and that language was handed down through a thousand years of tradition and custom ...How can they now, because the British brought us together, wish to impose their*

*language on us? We have not fought the imperialist in order to establish a new imperialism in this country.*

Even, the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) according to Idem (2002:18), acquired their majority status solely on the demographic strength of their speakers, and not because of any inherent quality they possess that the others lack. Thus, it became obvious that the choice of any of the three major indigenous languages never go down well with speakers of other Nigerian languages.

The second republic witnessed a further escalation of language problems confronting the nation when the three ‘major languages’ were again thrown up for consideration as the nation’s national language. This was met with stiff opposition as those considered belonging to the “minority languages” staged a walk out on the floor of the national assembly. Their fear was aptly captured by Babajide (2001:10) as the fear of being politically dominated, economically marginalized and culturally belittled is reasonably being entertained by each of these ethnic groups.

Also, attempts to have an indigenous national language gathered momentum during the second republic but all have met with a brickwall till date. For instance, languages such as ‘Swahili’, ‘Afrike’, ‘Igala’, the trilingual WAZOBIA had been proposed at one time without being implemented. A recent work by Ofoegbu (2012) proposed a democratic approach in choosing a national language, whereby any language to be adopted as the national language will be a language of the people, by the people and for the people. Hence, it should fulfill three criteria: cultural criteria, political criteria, and linguistic criteria. Cultural criteria represent that the language must adapt to Nigerian cultures by borrowing; political criteria signify neutrality of the language, while the linguistic criteria emphasize the numerical strength of the language. It must be widely spoken. Looking at this proposal, one is tempted to ask a question: which of the Nigerian languages can actually fulfill these criteria? Unfortunately, the attempt looks like the earlier unsuccessful ones.

Furthermore, the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which marks the commencement of the Third Republic has failed to address the national indigenous language problem by emphasizing more usage of English as against the indigenous languages as stated in Section 55 that:

*The business of the national assembly shall be conducted in English and in Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made therefore.*

The same thing goes for the state House of Assembly as specified in Section 97 that:

*The business of the house of assembly shall be conducted in English. but the house may in addition to English conduct the business of the house in one or more other languages spoken in the state as the house may by resolution approve.*

The constitution goes further to stipulate the minimum academic qualification for all aspirants of any of the political posts in the country as the Secondary School Leaving Certificate or its equivalent as indicated in sections 131(d), 177(d), 142(2) and 187(2) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended). Even at the Local Government level where aspirants are expected to be grass root politicians with emphasis on the mother tongue (MT), English is still given prominence. Reports evidently stated that campaigns in most towns and villages are done in English, party manifestoes are written in English, political advertisements on television, radio and newspapers are mostly carried out in English, thereby giving a minimal opportunity for the use of indigenous languages. These are clear attempts to disenfranchise or discourage the non-English speaking citizens from participating effectively in the democratic process. This is succinctly put by Ogunsiji (2013:30):

*In Nigeria today, English is the language of government, our Constitution is written in English, and the affairs of government at local, state and federal levels are conducted in English. But unfortunately, only a negligible part of our population can speak English. The implication of this is that contrary to the claim of practicing democracy, many people have been disenfranchised in our political process through the adoption of the language they do not understand*

The *National Policy on Education* (NPE, 2004) also indicates the following language provisions. Section 4, paragraph 15 states that:

*Government will 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*

This undoubtedly explains the fact that the indigenous languages are used in primary level as a medium of instruction while English language is used from the next stage to the tertiary level. Furthermore, the language component of the Junior Secondary Curriculum reads thus:

*In selecting the Nigerian languages, students should study the language of their own area in addition to any of the three main Nigerian Languages, Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba subject to availability of teachers.*

A critical look at language provisions in the *Constitution* and the *National Policy on Education* shows that they can be regarded as mere paper works, faced with series of implementation constraints. For instance, clauses such as, “...when adequate arrangements have been made”, “...the house may in addition to English conduct the business of the house in one or more other languages spoken in the state as the house may by resolution approve”, and the phrase, “subject to availability of teachers” are clear indications of government’s unwillingness to change the domineering status of English as against the indigenous languages. Alebiosu (2013) lamentably states that “policy on language which is meant to affect the life of people in all ramifications was unfortunately put together in the language (English) that most people do not understand. He further states that there cannot be any effective policy formulation and implementation especially the one that impact greatly on the lives of Nigerian people without proper development and utilization of the indigenous languages. In the words of Ayebo (2012), “the poor attention given to language by policy makers and implementers has usually predisposed such policies to failure”.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to note that despite the roles and acceptance of English by the elite, it has not achieved the expected political and educational goals. Many Nigerians, especially those residing in the rural areas are not educated. The UNESCO Report of 2013 shows adult literacy rate in Nigeria as 51%. If it is so, what happens to the remaining 49%? Will they be disenfranchised because of their deficiency in English? With this literacy rate in the country coupled with the fact that not all literate adults are politically inclined, while the interested illiterates suffer from language barrier, the future of democracy seems to be hanging in the balance.

The educational objective of using English is also gradually fading off. Lack of proficiency in the use of English by majority of those in our formal educational system is a major source of worry. The abysmal level of English language performance was further reflected in the results of students in the West African Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination where 20.17% passed English at Credit level in 2013, 31.28% in 2014 and 38.66% in 2015. Findings by scholars such as Adesanoye (2004) and Asiyanbola (2013) also reveal that the language performance of some learners and users of English in Nigeria as reflected in their communication competence is not good enough. Many Nigerians, as second language users of English, are still grappling with what is appropriate in English usage. A lot of errors occur in the news broadcast on radio and television. There is also undeniable poor use of English in Nigerian newspapers, magazines and that spoken by actors and actresses in Nigerian home videos. The majority of elected members of the Houses of Assembly and the National Assembly find it difficult to express themselves clearly during debates on the floor of the house due to their deficiency in English.

The study has clearly shown that the prominence given to English in the Nigerian linguistic environment can work against the democratic aspiration of the people. Also, the lackadaisical attitude of successive Nigerian governments to emphasize the use of indigenous languages to promote democracy in Nigeria may be seen as another factor endangering democracy in the country. Moreover relying solely on the three major indigenous languages to promote democracy is still confronted with inadequacies and shortcomings.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The focus of this report has been on the language challenges to sustenance of democracy in Nigeria. It draws attention to the need to develop a more sophisticated understanding and practice of democracy via the harmonious use of English and indigenous languages. There is no doubt that language will shape our democracy now and in the future. In other words, sustaining democracy in Nigeria requires adopting a language that will serve as a tool for national enlightenment, national mobilization, cultural awareness and political participation. It needs a language that embraces Nigeria and its democratic attitudes; that puts a great deal on the culture of the people and development of their capacity to build enduring democratic values and institutions. Finally, democracy in Nigeria must be shaped in a way that embraces path to humanity, tolerance, pluralism, peace, unity, national integration; and not one that fosters division, conflict and violence in the country. In order to achieve the aforementioned, the critique puts forward the following recommendations:

## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Federal government should positively review the current language policy by adopting a multilingual language policy whereby more indigenous languages can be used equally and harmoniously with the English language for political participation. All policies formulated and implemented in all spheres of Nigerian life must consider their language implications so as to be properly recognized, cognitively perceived, widely disseminated and massively supported. The reviewed policy statements must be implemented, monitored and regularly evaluated.

- For democratic participation at the Local Government level which is regarded as “the grass root”, the indigenous languages of the people within the locality should be emphasized more than the English language. The language of the immediate environment should be in accordance with the status of language of political participation and mass mobilization. Even for elective offices at this level, the academic qualification should be the First School Leaving Certificate.
- The three major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) along with those regarded as “major minority” languages and the English Language should be used at the state and national levels. The “major minority” languages are those that spoken in states where the natives do not understand any of the three major indigenous languages. These may include Ibibio, Efik, Edo, Igala and others. It is essential for speakers of these languages to be involved linguistically if democracy must be sustained in the country.
- It should be constitutionally made compulsory for each state to use the mother tongue (MT) for debate in the House of Assembly at least twice in a week or a month depending on the number of sittings. This should also be extended to Senate and House of Representatives if necessary; and interpreters should be employed for the three major as well as other “major minority” languages as done in the United Nations general assembly. This gives equal opportunity to honourable members so that they can contribute in debates on the floor of the House irrespective of their proficiency in English.
- There should be a newly designed curriculum for Nigerian schools basically on the tenets of democracy. It should be written in English and the proposed indigenous languages be made compulsory subjects/courses for students in secondary schools and tertiary institutions. Language teachers in our schools should be properly trained in order to teach the subject properly.
- Lastly, efforts towards standardization of the Nigerian variety of English should be intensified to project Nigeria’s socio-cultural reality, promote national development, engender enduring democracy and acquire global relevance just like the American English.

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