A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANSWER TO NIGERIA'S NATIONAL LANGUAGE QUESTION

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Abstract

This paper addresses the question of the choice of a national language in Nigeria. Its first section reviews some of the positions or proposals of some scholars who have attempted answers to the question. However, because the submissions made thus far are yet to provide an appropriate candidate to be adopted as the national language, the second main part of this paper proposes a way out – a sociolingustic answer that might break the deadlock. The writer of this paper argues that this answer accommodates not only the interests of the diverging stakeholders but also the peculiar multi-ethnoglinguistic realities on ground. It is anticipated that this sociolinguistic answer might go a long way to foster national integration, unity, and development.

Keywords: national language, sociolinguistics, multilingual societies, lingual Franca

language policy, Wazobia, minority language

Introduction

The debate on the choice of an appropriate national language in Nigeria is as old as the nation. It appears that the concerted efforts of many linguists to provide a language that would take into account the multi-ethnolinguistic nature of the country have been futile. In fact, a recent escapist approach suggests that the national language question should be jettisoned, to give room for the knotty problem of rescuing some indigenous languages from extinction (Babajide, 2007). However, there is another position that stresses the need to search for a national language. For example, Banjo (1994) says that there should be a 'linguistic rallying force' by which Nigerians from different language communities and diverse cultural milieus can find a common cause and identity and that it is in such a common recourse that they can express their Nigerianness and be so easily recognized.

This remark emphasizes the importance of a national language. A national language serves as a symbol of national identity of a people and distinguishes them as an entity from others, in other words, it marks 'we' as opposed to 'they'- separatism and distinctiveness. Because we concur with Banjo (1994) and see the national question as a pertinent subject that should be given due attention, this paper revisits the subject and as a modest attempt, proposes a sociolinguistic answer to the question of a national language in Nigeria. This is akin to the complementary provision of the educational policy which indirectly proposes three major languages as the national languages in its clause which says: 'as a means of fostering national unity each child should learn one of the major languages other than his or her mother tongue' (National Policy on Education, 1981). It is anticipated that our sociolinguistic proposal would help some other multilingual and multicultural communities in Africa that are being confronted with a similar challenge.

National language

Perhaps one way to begin this section on a national language is to distinguish between a national language and a lingua franca on the one hand, and a national language and an official language on the other hand. One reason for this is that a national language is often confused with a lingua franca and an official language. Technically, the terms national language, official language, and lingua franca are not synonymous. Let us begin with the official language. An official language is a language of administration (used in government, courts of law, and for official business) within a country and sometimes it is used as a means of international communication. An official language has 'its restriction to 'the secondary domain cluster' consisting mainly of administrative, economic, political and educational uses' Bamgbose (2000:104). Very often, the role of an official language is enforced by legislation or decree and to a large extent it is restricted to formal settings. It has been noted that its function is primarily utilitarian rather than symbolic (Holmes, 1992). For example, the Nigerian Constitution stipulates the use of English as the official language. In addition, the major Nigerian languages, Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo are to be used as official languages for proceedings in the National Assembly. And on its list of official languages, French is added (Sections 55 and 97 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria). It is noted that the English language is solely in use as the official language being the language of official record and communication.

According to Richards, Platt and Platt (1985:214), the term lingua franca (Italian for *Frankish* tongue) originated in the Mediterranean region in the middle ages among crusaders and traders of different language backgrounds. To them, a lingua franca is a "language of necessity whose major role is to bridge the communication gap amongst people of diverging tongues". Usually, it lacks official backing. For example, Nigerian Pidgin and the English language are widely used among Nigerians as lingua franca across their multi-ethnolinguistic groups. The term auxiliary language is sometimes used as a synonym to capture the role of lingua franca (a helping language). As a language that is used for communication between different groups of people, each group speaking a different language, the choice of a lingua franca is not restricted. A choice might be made from an international language, the native language of one of the groups of people, or a language that is not native to any of the groups.

A national language is considered as the main language of a nation. For example, German is the national language of Germany and it is no doubt that, that is the main language of the nation. However, the adjective *main* is very ambiguous since it is not clear whether it connotes the language that is most widely used in a country going by the count of its users compared to other languages used in the country. In fact, that concept of a national language is suspect because although a national language should enjoy a wider coverage among users within a country yet it is not a mandatory prerequisite. What may be more important is the basis of its selection. Thus in a sense, the national language is the language selected as the symbol of nationhood (Bamgbose, 2000). This definition is akin to another insightful definition which says that a 'national language is a language of national cohesion and unity'. The last definition reiterates the value that the citizens of a country generally attach to their national language. This is comparable to what nationals often do to their national anthem and flag. In other words, to them, the national language is a symbol of common existence, sovereignty and unity. Holmes (1992:105) defines a national language as a language generally developed and used as a symbol of national unity and it is often regarded as a symbol of nationhood. Also, a national language has been described as the language of a political, cultural and social unit.

Talking about its functions, a national language functions to ensure the unity of a state as well as to assert its independence – it unifies the state and also separates a state from other entities. A national language may have an official backing, in other words, a government may declare a particular language or dialect to be the national language of its country e.g. Bahasa Malaysia (Standard Malay) in Malaysia and Filipino in the Philippines. It has been suggested that it is possible to develop or construct a national language. For example, Bahamas Indonesia and Swahili were developed to serve as the national languages in Malaysia and Tanzania respectively.

From this explication, it appears that in terms of functions, a national language is distinct from an official language and a lingua franca although they may have some common characteristics. For example, a national language and an official language may enjoy official backing. However, government backing is not mandatory for a national language but it is for an official language. Also while a national language is symbolic, an official language is simply a language for government business, etc. According to Holmes (1985:105) sociolinguists often make a distinction between a national language and an official language along the affective-referential dimension, or more precisely, the ideological-instrumental dimension. As noted earlier, a national language can also be used as an official language. For example, Singapore has four official languages (Singaporean English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil), which are also the national languages of the country.

In the same vein, it is not impossible to have one language serving as the national language and the lingua franca of a country, e.g. the use of Swahili in some parts of Africa (e.g. Tanzania). To conclude this section, it is clear that the terms national language, official language and linqua franca are not synonymous. In functions, we may have an overlap, in other words, a language might be used to serve as the official and national language. In fact, it is not impossible for a nation to have the same (one) language serving the functions of the national and official language e.g., English is the official language in Britain and the unofficial national language as well. Since our concern in this paper is the national language question in Nigeria, we underline the assumptions that a national language serves a number of functions. It unifies the state and represents it (the state) as a political, cultural and social unit.

Criteria for choosing national language

Nida and Wonderly (1977) suggest three criteria for choosing a national language. One, a national language should be politically neutral (no political bias as it must not unduly favour any of the linguistic communities against the other communities in the same state). Two, the language of choice should be linguistically related to other indigenous languages as this will aid its learning by non-native speakers within the country. And three, the language should be spoken as a mother tongue by a substantial community of speakers who can serve as satisfactory models.

Another criterion is the symbolic one suggested by Leith (1997:212). According to Leith (1997), in choosing a national language, symbolism plays an important role. In fact, since a national language acts among other things, as a symbol of uniqueness and unity (Holmes, 1992) it stands to reason that an ideal national language should be symbolic. In addition to the above criteria, certain factors should be considered in the choice of a national language with particular reference to Nigeria. One of them is the language situation. Nigeria is not only one of the 37 multilingual countries in Africa with more than one dominant language

(UNESCO, 1985; Bamgbose, 1991, 2000) but has a long standing colonial language heritage and policy that might be difficult to push aside. Still addressing her language situation, we have a supposed classification of its over 400 languages into majority and minority languages and its attendant problems of language dominance and language threat.

According to Bamgbose (2000) the most important problem for many countries is the existence of the so-called minority languages which in Nigeria can be formidable as evidenced by her minority languages which account for 36.4% of her total population. Another factor is language attitude towards the existing languages and the last is the objective which should transcend mere communication although a national language that has no ethnic sentiment attached to it should serve the purpose of communication adequately and for national integration. In other words, the kind of function that the language will serve – national unity and integration is a major factor to reckon with. In the next section of this paper, we shall use some of these criteria to critically review what some scholars have submitted on the question of the national language for Nigeria.

Proposed national languages

Many different languages have been proposed by different scholars. Amongst them are Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin, a constructed language – Wazobia, a majority language – Hausa, a minority indigenous language – Edo, and Swahili. Osisanya (2005) groups the proposers into the following – the anti-imperialist school, the nationalist school, the pro-indigenous language group, the pro-Nigerian English movement and the others into another group.

Nigerian English

The candidature of the English language (Nigerian English) has not only been suggested but it is *de facto* Nigeria's national language. However, the anti-imperialist group, as a movement which is an offshoot of a larger resistance body or call for the removal of all imperialist garb (English and other European languages) argues that English, as one of the Africa's erstwhile colonizers' languages, is still a tool of post colonialism as its usage in the stead of African languages presupposes Africa's dependence on its former overlords. For example, an African literary writer and critic, Ngugi wa Thiongo criticizes the use of English, French and other European languages by African writers. He argues that the unquestioned usage of European languages by Africans can be seen as their endorsement of Europe's perceived notion of Africa as a sub-human, uncivilized continent. He substantiates his stance by giving an analysis of how the impartation and institution of English in Kenya led to the erosion of the citizens' cultural awareness and appreciation while creating in their psyche the need to identify with foreign values. This, he says, sets them up for exploitation and cultural erasure. For colonization to achieve its aim of controlling Africa's wealth, he continues, "it needed to control Africans' mentality, culture and sense of identity. To do this, English, French and Portuguese were forced on Africa as tools of cultural alienation. The domination of a people's language by the language of the colonizing nation was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized…" (1986:16).

In sum, this school of thought argues that the use of a language associated with colonization confirms and perpetuates the subjugation of the country to ex-colonial masters, and English is one of such languages. Leith (1997) also believes that English is seen as a symbol of dominance, exploitation and brings to mind the collusion with the white masters. In similar vein, some Nigerian linguists have argued against the use of English in the capacity

of a national language in Nigeria. Their reasons range from political to moral considerations. For example, Ebam (1990) holds that the choice of English as a national language in Nigeria is ill-advised because, for one, it is a foreign language spoken by only ten percent of the population. He adds that it is impossible to regard the language as politically and culturally neutral, stating as some of its negative influences the moral decadence prevalent in the Nigerian society, and the relegation of Nigerian ideas and commodities in preference for foreign ones. He cites the subject of morality as a militating factor against English.

Although Ajulo (2000) does not endorse the choice of any of the Nigerian languages as the most suitable for the national language because of its linguistically dense nature, he argues that the need to accelerate the decolonization of the mind makes it imperative that English be brought down from its pedestal. He advocates the translation of European literary works into Nigerian languages. In the same vein, Adegbija (1994) sees the English language as a language of imposition, which has, in Nigeria led to the underuse of indigenous languages. Thus, he questions and disapproves the use of English. For the anti-imperialists, the bottom-line is the need to shed off every form of direct and indirect European domination and exploitation, which on the other hand poses a challenge – the demand for a national language that is void of every form of post colonization.

Another factor that militates against the adoption of English is the staggering fact that only a very negligible percentage of the people have access to English because of the high-level of illiteracy. According to Egbokhare (2004), 50% of Nigerians are still stark illiterate with less than 20% of the people who might be thought to have had access to higher education. Consequently, the pockets of users of English dotted in some parts of the country might be difficult to rely upon as model users for the rest of the people. In fact, Babajide (2007:42) believes that the supposed classes of people who are literate in English are not to be counted upon when the question of accountability, integrity and probity are raised. To him, the educated Nigerians have disappointed the Nigerian public and their serving as models may be unwelcome. To many Nigerians, western education and in this case English is an instrument of exploitation.

In summary, the anti-imperialist group opposes the candidate of English as a means of shedding off the colonial yoke. It calls for a national language that reflects an independent and the sovereign state of Nigeria. Thus Banjo (1990:18) sums up the various views thus:

> It is understandable that some of the Nigerian nationalists should look upon the English language as the symbol of colonialism. To such nationalists, the indigenous cultures could not possibly come back into their own unless the English language, together with its cultural baggage, was reduced in importance in the national scheme of things.

In spite of the arguments against the choice of English as a national language, some researchers (Osunsanya, 2005) are still pushing for Nigerian English. It is argued that since no ethnic group in Nigerian can lay claim to English as its own, this political neutrality that it satisfies, qualifies it as the national language for the country. It has also been advanced that since the kind of English used in Nigeria is a distinct variety from the English of the colonizers (so that as a localized variety of English), it might as well be the long awaited national language that the country has been longing to have. In other words, although the variety of English used in Nigeria conforms to the rules governing sentence formation and the other linguistic rules of international English, it is basically a product of a process that has

been called nativisation or nigerianisation (a kind of modification) that reflects unique Nigerian experiences (though not of a particular ethnic group although studies show that we do have ethnic varieties of Nigerian English such as Yoruba Nigerian English, Igbo Nigerian English, Hausa Nigerian English and the others). In fact, it is held in some quarters that there are enough native users and educated users of the language (Nigerian English) that may serve as models for learners of the language. Another consideration that commends the choice of Nigerian English is that it was also used as a tool during the battle for independence (Banjo 1995).

However, in spite of the arguments for the candidature of English, the proposal is yet to enjoy the blessing of many Nigerians because of the memory of the past that English evokes and of the fear of any form of postcolonialism. The argument for and against the candidature of English may be summarized in the way Bamgbose (1991:05) puts it:

> Post-independence and post-liberation language planning has been mainly geared to language policy formulation, particularly as a reaction to the erstwhile colonial policies. The policies of the past continue to influence and in, in some cases, determine those of the present. The colonial legacy is a recurrent factor in the language policies of African governments. In practically all fields (education, communication, administration, politics and development), the question has always been whether or not it is desirable or even possible to break away from the existing practices, and if so, at what cost.

A Majority Language

The disqualification of English and Nigerian English had led to the search for another language. Two candidates have been put forward–a majority language and a minority language. One indigenous majority language that has been proposed is the Hausa language because of its (i) trans-African spread, (ii) its status as the lingual franca in the Northern part of the country, (iii) its adherence to grammar rules than any other indigenous language in Nigeria, and (iv) its use in the international media (Munkaila and Haruna 2001). In addition, the language is spoken in Nigeria by a large section of its ethnic groups and it is taught in schools to a large section of speakers of other Nigerian major languages. In addition, it has been added that introducing Hausa as the national language will cost the nation's purse less because it already has a larger percentage of Nigerians as native speakers.

However, the Hausa people are perceived by the other tribes in the country as a political threat, a perception that inevitably affects the choice of Hausa as a national language. In fact, the political dominance by the Northerners in the country since independence poses a threat. For example, historically, presidents/heads of states from the North West Zone have ruled the country for over 26 years, a privilege that the other zones are yet to enjoy. Two, the historical massacre of the Igbo people in the North in the 1960s (Mazrui 1998) does not lend a strong support for the choice of Hausa as the national language. Another disqualifying factor is a religious one, which associates the Hausa language with the religion of Islam. Mazrui (1998) refers to Hausa as an Islamic language with a strong Islamic influence. This, he said is reflected in the language at both the explicit and suggestive levels. This is corroborated by the view that "the study of Hausa provides the most informative entry into the world of Islam in West Africa" (Munkaila and Andrew 2001:39). One example that is often cited about the level of islamization of the Hausa people is the fact that most of them

regard Allah (an Arabic word) as the native name of God rather than Ubangiji (a Hausa word). The recurrent religious intolerance in some states dominated by Hausa speaking people that often claims many lives and leads to loss of properties of those of the other faith to Islam may not encourage large votes for Hausa as Nigeria's national language. Also, as a secular state, Nigeria favours multi-faith thus any move to impose any language of those whose major religion is Islam might be interpreted in some quarters as a subtle move to turn the country into an Islamic state.

In fact, the multi-ethnolinguistic nature of the Nigerian society does not favour the choice of any of the indigenous languages that are estimated to be over 400. For example, the minority language group in the country considers the choice of any of the major languages (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) as a threat to their existence. While reacting to the choice of one of the major languages, a politician is reported as saying that as one who comes from a minority tribe, he deploys the people that wish to impose their customs, their language and even more, their ways of life upon the smaller tribes (cited in Mazrui 1998:18-19). Thus the choice of any of the major languages has been ruled out on the grounds that they would pose a strong threat to the existence of the other indigenous languages. Banjo (1991) cautioned that the political survival of Nigeria as a country would be more seriously threatened than it is if the Government should adopt one of the major languages as the one national language. Babajide (2007) argues that the imposition of one of these major languages constitutes a threat to the continued existence of their (minority) languages because they are likely to be relegated to the status of languages of rurality.

A Minority Language

For the fear of majority domination, others have suggested the adoption of any of the minority indigenous languages in place of a majority language. The argument is that the weight thrown behind the majority language might be a subtle way of subjugating the minority, their culture, norms and values thereby leading to the exaltation and imposition of a majority group on the minority group. Thus rather than have a majority language, perhaps a minority language, e.g., Edo might be appropriate. Aside from the above it does not appear that any other strong reason has been advanced in support of the minority language. However, the choice of a minority language is also fraught with ethnic issues and low population of speakers.

Swahili or Wazobia

Those advocating an indigenous language have also challenged linguists to take a leaf from Tanzania as an example of a country in Africa with a well-defined endoglossic national language policy (Oyetade, 2001). The argument is that with adequate planning, Nigeria can achieve a similar feat or adopt Swahili as its national language. In response to this challenge, Wazobia was proposed. Wazobia which is coined from – *Wa* , aYoruba word for come, *zo* from Hausa and *bia*, from Ibo is an amalgamated language from these three major languages. Unfortunately, it was turned down for the fact that it lacks any naturalness that should characterize a human language.

The rejection of Wazobia led to the proposal of Swahili. Swahili was chosen as Tanzania national language after their independence. Bamgbose (2000:106,107) describes this feat thus: "the promotion of Swahili as the country's national language as one of the success stories of African language revitalization and development". He adds that the Tanzania

experience points to the need for conducive political climate and a continued commitment by the leaders to the implementation of agreed policies. Politically, Tanzania's choice of Swahili was also influenced by its role in Tanzania's landscape. According to Abdulaziz (1971) Swahili was the language of nationalism, the language of mobilization during the quest for political independence. He added that Swahili was also favoured because it was not associated with any single politically powerful group. Thus after independence, the use of Swahili as a symbol of inter-ethnic unity and nationalism paved the way for its use to national glory. Finally, he added the linguistic relatedness: Swahili and Bantu languages are so closely related at all the linguistic levels, that speakers of these languages can understand one another with ease.

However, it is argued that Nigeria may find it difficult to follow the example of Tanzania and adopt Swahili. According to Abdulaziz (1971), Tanzania's language policy owes its success to various historical, political, religious and socio-cultural factors, which favoured the emergence of Kiswahili (also known as Swahili) as an acceptable national language. For example, the peculiar feature of her culture was that it assimilated the Arab-Islamic culture that came its way, as well as other regional cultures it encountered. This made it a culture everyone in the country (Tanzania) could identify with, as it had something from every culture in the country. Thus when a language of unity was needed, it only made sense to choose the language of the great tradition – Swahili (Abdulaziz 1971).

The consideration for a language similar to Swahili or Swahili itself is very important but it is pertinent to consider the fact that Nigeria and Tanzania do not share so many, if any, similar political, ethnic, cultural and linguistic scenarios. For example, unlike Tanzania, which has one Great Tradition, Nigeria has at least three main traditions – Yoruba, Hausa and Ibo. Nigeria has been classified as a country with more than one Great Tradition with all vying for dominance and assertion. Nigeria is made up of autonomous, well-defined separate nations (the Oyo Kingdom for the Yoruba people, The Hausa-Fulani Empire, the Igbo republican system, and the Benin Empire, to mention a few. These former empires had their distinct cultural and administrative systems that have survived the amalgamation and subsequently the creation of Nigeria as a nation. A society is often characterized by a unique culture, which distinguishes it from other societies. How far this is true of modern Nigeria is another subject that may interest sociologists but many argue that Nigeria is a nation of nations. According to Le Page (1964) many of these countries (including Nigeria) owe their frontiers to the old colonial regimes which, for motives of their own – administrative convenience, or the geography of white exploration and settlement - gave a sometimes spurious unity to regions which had little otherwise to recommend them as national entities.

Also while an indigenous language served as the vehicle of actualizing political independence and nationalism in Tanzania, a foreign language, the English language, played that role in Nigeria. In addition, most of the languages spoken in Nigeria are rather linguistically unrelated to one another just as the cultures diverge. Nigerian languages have been classified into three separate language groups – Niger Congo, Nilo-Sahara and Afro-Asiatic (Blench, 1998). For example, the Yoruba language and Igbo belong to the Kwa peoples, while Hausa belongs to a Chadic-speaking people in terms of language family (typology).

In addition, it appears that the ruling elite in Nigeria is yet to see the need to break away from the colonial heritage, rather, the need to perpetuate the use of English (the language of exclusion) is stronger than to consider the bold step that their counterparts in Tanzania took.

After all, Ghana is toeing a similar line of action among other countries in Africa (using their former colonial masters' language(s). Other examples are Namibia that still uses English, Mozambique, Portuguese. Thus while Tanzania could emerge with an endoglossic language as its national language, Nigeria may not find it a mean task to come up with one even where there is a political will to do so.

The disqualification of the languages proposed thus far has made the search for an appropriate language among the people more difficult. One other factor that makes it a Herculean task is that Nigeria is characterized by a multiplicity of language, ethnic and cultural groups. With a current estimated population of 150 million people and a language count of about 450, McArthur (1996) had divided the population (which he puts at 110.5 million over a decade ago) along the following ethnic lines – Hausa 21%, Yoruba 21%, Igbo 18%, Fulani 10%, Tiv 6%, Kanuri 5%, Ibibio 5% and others 10%. In fact, the emergence of Nigeria as a country (as mentioned earlier) is a courtesy of the (British) colonizers that did not consider the diversities of the people. Thus, the arbitrary merging of varied autonomous societies with different languages, cultures does not favour the choice of a national language for the country. Fishman (1971) classifies Nigeria as a country with more than one great tradition with all vying for dominance and assertion.

Nigerian Pidgin

As an alternative to indigenous languages, Nigerian Pidgin has been proposed as a possible choice for the national language. It has to its credit its use as the language of trade, the lingua franca, and the first language of some southerners in Nigeria (Egbokhare, 2001; Azu, 2007). Before the colonization of the Niger Area, the use of Pidgin was limited basically to trade relations and has been described as a language of convenience. But it has witnessed a tremendous development – the emergence of varied orthography and grammar. In some parts of the country, (South, south), it is used as the language of instruction in the elementary school years. Nigerian Pidgin (hereafter NP) is a kind of Pidgin used in Nigeria as a full-fledged language with native speakers in Nigeria and should not be pejoratively referred to as a protolanguage, as it is being referred to in many parts of the world. In fact, Adeniran (2005:01) claims that the kind of Pidgin in use in Nigeria is now recognized and referred to as Nigerian Pidgin instead of its former reference as Nigerian Pidgin English, which are usages that are very hard to be formally identified as English "because lexico-syntactically, their manifestations violate the rules of the parent language" (English).

While commenting on the status of NP in Nigeria, Osakwe (2005) notes that NP is now competing fiercely with English for dominance in domains hitherto considered exclusive to English, especially among Deltans (people from the Delta area of Nigeria). She reiterates some linguists' arguments that NP has since attained the status of a Creole in Sapele and Warri and adds that the social stigma associated with NP is now waning as NP continues to influence the socio-political and economic life as well as the language behaviour of well over 3million out of the 150 million people of Nigeria. She concludes that the propagation and enforcement of NP in formal and informal contexts suggests that NP may become the elusive national language Nigerians have been searching for (Osakwe 2005:20). In addition, Nigerian Pidgin in the Diaspora has assumed another dimension. According to Onyeche (2004:52) within the Nigerian community in Sweden, speaking Nigerian Pidgin is seen as a mark of being a Nigerian. Nigerians in Sweden use NP to consolidate relationships. Thus resorting to NP abroad is for communal inclusion as it is the Nigerian 'tongue' which many Europeans and Americans cannot comprehend. Onyeche (2004:53) noted that:

> Even among Swedes married to Nigerians or Swedes who have lived in Nigeria NP is upheld as a symbol of being a Nigerian. Although some of these Swedes have tried to learn the Nigerian languages of their spouses, they still try to speak NP through which they feel they can bond with Nigerians…

The way Nigerians have come to perceive NP as part of their national identity makes it unusual when a non-Nigerian is heard speaking it.

In sum, this evidence strongly supports the candidature of Nigerian Pidgin as Nigeria's national language. Commenting on the status of Nigerian Pidgin, Osoba (2008:172) observes that the standardization features evidently point to the prospects and potential of NP as a national language.

However, the fact that Pidgin or NP is English-based might arguably be used to disqualify it as a candidate for a national language in Nigeria. In a private conversation with a leading linguist in Nigeria, Professor Funso Akere, he is of the view that NP is yet to have a uniform orthography. In other words, it lacks codification. In addition, Nigerians' and outisders' attitude towards Pidgin is rather negative. From the foregoing, it appears that a suitable language is yet to be found for the multi-ethnolinguistic society. In other words, an indigenous language, a mongrel language like Wazobia, Swahili, Broken English, Guosa, and Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin are yet to enjoy the blessings of many Nigerians thus leaving the question unanswered. This has led to the use of English to act in *abnetio*. But is there an answer to the national language question in Nigeria?

It is interesting to note that all the proposals thus far tend to promote one principle that might be tagged 'one nation, one language movement' and that in a multilingual setting. In other words, they all support the view, which states that one nation or a people should have one national language. This concept is rooted in the belief that a separate national language is a necessary condition for a nation to survive. In other words, national identity should be tied to one national language. This principle may be tagged Eurocentric since it is upheld by nations such as the USA, the UK where the objective is to promote a nation as an ethnic and linguistic monolith in the face of a multi-ethnic and linguistically diversified society.

However, in as much as the one-nation, one-language approach has its strengths it is also fraught by so many problems. For example, the fear is often entertained that a monolithic linguistic and cultural system might be a menace to human existence particularly in multi-ethnic societies. Two, a monolithic philosophy has also been criticized as a charade where it has become inevitable as a measure to achieve the suppression of the other linguistic/ethnic groups, which might be a threat to an idolized ethnic identity. These reasons and many others make one nation, one language principle less desirable for countries that are 'blessed' with multi-ethnolinguistic culture. Thus the author of this paper argues that the choice of one language – the philosophy of one nation, one culture and one people might be impracticable in a multi-ethnolinguistic society, e.g., Nigeria.

The major concern of this paper is that because Nigeria consists of so many languages with diverging ethnic groups, a one-nation, one-language principle might be impracticable in its multi-ethnic society if each language and group is to be given consideration. The importance of giving due recognition/consideration to each group and language is stressed by Coupland and Jaworski (1997:323) who said that language is one of the most important forms of human symbolic behaviour and is a key component of many groups' social identities. It would

amount to cultural colonization to impose one of the many indigenous languages of a multi-ethnic/linguistic society on the others within the same country; "because people belong to different groups and have many potential identities, where different codes will serve as markers or even tools for forging these identities" Coupland and Jaworski 1997:323). This observation suggest that it might be difficult to be dogmatic about the view that national or ethnic identity should be tied to a national or one ethnic group and/or language especially in multilingual societies.

From the foregoing, it appears that the choice of a single language to serve a nation with diversified peoples, cultures, and languages of Nigeria is practically near impossible if national unity is to be maintained. In other words, in a multilingual Nigeria, the choice of a national language would be problematic, at least, if the country is to take a leaf from a multilingual country like India where all the attempts to give Hindi the sole status of the national language have not been successful. At least, Zaire, an African country which has four national languages, Swahili, Tshiluba, Kikongo and Lingala (which) suggests that it might not be out of place for Nigeria to have more than one national language among other African countries who have more than one national language (See an adapted sociolinguistic profile of some selected African countries in Table 1). It is along this vein that this paper proposes a sociolinguistic answer.

Table 1: Some African Countries and their National Languages

Country	Number of languages	National language(s)
Angola	1	1, Setswana (spoken by 90% of the population)
Botswana	25	1, Setswana (spoken by 90% of the population)
Kenya	18	1, Kiswahili (spoken by 65% of the population)
Malawi	12 above	1, Chichewa (spoken by 80%)
South Africa languages	25-80	11 official languages with no designated national
Tanzania	135-150	1, Kiswahili
Zambia	80	4 major indigenous languages
Zimbabwe	8 plus	2 Chishona and isiNdebele

(Source: adapted from Vic Webb and Kembo-Sure, 2000:46-52)

This table suggests that the adoption of one language would be ill-informed for Nigeria.

A sociolinguistic answer

One main tenet of sociolinguistics, or rather, the primary goal of sociolinguistics, has been "to assert principles of linguistic and cultural pluralism". These principles are averse to

any written and unwritten agenda in communities that promote ethnic, cultural and linguistic monolithic programmes (including the choice of one national language in multilingual societies). Therefore, in response to the choice of a national language in a multi-ethnolingustic society, sociolinguistics offers pluralism not monolithism. It advocates full recognition of every ethnic group and its codes in their speech communities. In sum, sociolinguistic principles help to combat what has been described as linguistic alienation/colonialism/imperialism or linguistic cleansing or ban on bilingual education in a country.

For the multilingual, multicultural and multiethnic Nigeria, sociolinguistics offers more than one language for the national language question. Nigeria should permit as many languages as it can 'accommodate' as national languages within a practicable framework. This may appear untidy but it seems to be a workable option in order to keep all the various groups (together) under one nation. However, this does not mean that all the over 400 languages should be adopted as the national languages. But it may be worth considering to extend the scope beyond the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba). Thus, pluralism is proposed for multiethnolinguistic communities where the imposition of a national language is impracticable. In fact one of the worst consequences or end products of selecting one indigenous language out of many languages in a multi-ethnic society is racism: *we against you* – superiority of the native speakers of the language chosen above the speakers of the other languages.

In spite of our position in this paper, it is noted that linguistic pluralism is not popular in some quarters. For example, certain linguists argue against linguistic pluralism because of their belief that one national language (the language of unity) is indispensable in nation building. For example, Hon-Chan (1971:37) believes that linguistic pluralism is one of the most intractable barriers to national unity because of its built-in propensity for perpetuating communalism or tribalism, which inhibits the growth of a national culture and national identity. To him, a common language, which facilitates national communication through the mass media, could serve as a powerful bond between ethnic groups. However, multilingual societies (Zaire, Singapore, India, Zimbabwe and the others) that operate pluralism or have more than one national language have not been reported to be encountering disintegration as a result of their pluralinguistic system. In fact, Singapore with her more than one national language is difficult to be classified as an under-developed country. South Africa's 1996 Constitution provides for eleven official languages – Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, and isiZulu which are invariably their national languages.

Another myth that should be demystified is the belief that a national identity can only be tied to a national language. This may not always be the case. For example, in spite of the loss of Irish Gaelic, the nation has not lost her sense of nationhood. This is not to undermine the place of language in the assertion of a people's identity. But where it is near impossible to have one language as a national language, the writer of this paper posits that pluralism as practised in Singapore and India is worthy of emulation especially in Nigeria and other multilingual societies grappling with the problem of choosing a national language from a plethora of languages.

One of the anticipated problems that might be associated with pluralism is smooth communication across ethnic groups or harmony among them. One of the ways to overcome this problem in Nigeria is to choose one of the popular languages, e.g. Nigerian Pidgin, to

serve as the medium of wider communication across ethnic/language groups. For example, many Nigerians use Nigerian Pidgin which is fast gaining more speakers than any other languages in the country. This language to certain extent does serve as a binding force or rather a lingua franca because of the amount of Nigerianness in it although it must be noted that linguistic heterogeneity does not always guarantee harmony. Ekpu (1989) observed that although it can be said that linguistic accessibility can contribute to societal harmony, it is noteworthy that language is not the only stabilizing factor, which is why even linguistically homogenous societies do experience, from time to time, a certain degree of social upheaval.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper, from a sociolinguistic point of view proposes pluralism for Nigeria's national language problem. Nigeria needs one more national language. In the process to adopting more than one language, planners should ensure that pluralism does not degenerate into polarity among the ethnic groups. Thus, it is suggested that in addition to the three major indigenous languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, a mechanism should be put in place for the development of the other minority languages as codified languages are to be adopted. For example, Edo, Efik, Fulani, Nupe, Tiv, Urhobo among others appear ready to be adopted as national languages. Sociolinguistics recognizes that all human languages are equal and that heterogeneity is a feature of human society and language use. However, it might be very untidy to adopt all the living languages in Nigeria as national languages.

In the process of adopting more than one language as national languages, no scheme should be put in place to circumvent the complete circle of language planning which entails fact-finding, evaluation of alternatives, policy formulation and implementation. Bamgbose (2000:102) holds that the process by which a language planning decision is arrived at is held out as involving a number of steps including fact-finding before decision making, consideration of alternatives, and a scheme in which goals are established, means are selected, and outcomes are predicted in a systematic manner'. This is exemplified in what South Africa did to evolve its 11 official languages (see Bamgbose 2000:108-110 for details). Debate and discussion preceded policy formulation and contributions were invited from individuals, corporate bodies, professionals, academic bodies and special committees were set up and contributions were got from all the strata of the society. The decision should not be left to government bodies (top-bottom approach). Finally, there must be statement of policy since the 'absence of any statement of policy … is indeed a policy in that it usually means a continuation of erstwhile policies (Bamgbose, 2000).

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