

LANGUAGE CONTACT IN NIGERIAN MULTILINGUAL SOCIETY

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Abstract. Multilingual society, being a society that has more than one significant language group is a sociolinguistic phenomenon that arises as a result of language contact but the fundamental problem in this type of society is that to enthrone one of the languages can be accepted conveniently as the National language. Any attempt to enthrone one of the languages at the expense of the other has proven a failure due to the fact that it appears as distinct, which is inherent and regrettably discriminating and domineering on the other languages and this dies in the mine of ethnic bickering. In Nigeria, like many other African nations, multilingualism is a rule, rather than an exemption, the problem of ‘forging ahead’ is of crucial importance. Among the competing languages that scramble for national recognition or official status, whether indigenous or foreign, one must emerge as the official language (the language of administration and education at some levels), the language of relevance, from the competition for the purpose of uniting the nation. Fortunately, English has emerged as that privileged language of its kind. The Nigerian society is irretrievably heterogeneous. Students from diverse ethno-linguistic, cultural and economic groups are exposed quite early to several languages, including their mother tongues and English. Nigerian scholars have variously, as have others examined the connec-

tion between multilingualism and interference; we avail ourselves of such studies in situating our reflections. This paper thus looks into the importance of language, most especially English language in the multi-lingual society.

Keywords: language contact, multilingualism, bilingualism, ethnolinguistics, socio-linguistics

Background to the study

Multilingual society is a society which has more than one significant language group. It is a sociolinguistic phenomenon that arises as a result of language contact. It is a situation in which two (i.e. bilingualism, specially) or more languages operate within the same context. Nigeria is a multilingual society with an estimated number of indigenous languages ranging from 400 – 500 with Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba as the major languages with about 18 million speakers (Adegbite, 2003). The fundamental problem is that to enthrone one of the languages can be accepted conveniently as the National language. Any attempt to enthrone one of the languages at the expense of the other has proven a failure due to the fact that it appears as distinct which is inherent and regrettably discriminating and domineering on the other languages and this dies in the mine of ethnic bickering (Aito, 1999).

Adetuyi & Adeniran (2017) define bilingualism as the use of two languages by an individual or a community. In other words, bilingualism allows the existence of two languages in the repertoire of an individual or speech community. Bilingualism is also described as the ability of an individual to produce meaningful utterances in the other language. It can be viewed as a situation where an individual has the ability to speak two languages in a bilingual society but more proficient in one of the two languages than the other.

It is important to note that bilingualism has an essential characteristic of being a consequence of language in contact which deals with the direct or indirect influence on the other Nigeria, for example is a bilingual community where

many bilingual communities exist such as Yoruba and English, Hausa and English as well as Igbo and English.

In Nigeria, like many other African nations, multilingualism is a rule, rather than an exemption, the problem of ‘forging ahead’ is of crucial importance. Among the competing languages that scramble for national recognition or official status, whether indigenous or foreign, one must emerge as the official language (the language of administration and education at some levels), the language of relevance, from the competition for the purpose of uniting the nation. Fortunately, English has emerged as that privileged language of its kind. The Nigerian society is irretrievably heterogeneous. Students from diverse ethno-linguistic, cultural and economic groups are exposed quite early to several languages, including their mother tongues and English. (Kwofie, 1985) cites this factor and the lack of adequately adapted resources as adversely affecting the teaching of English Language in Nigeria. He asserts that the African child, in most cases, has been immersed in two to five languages right from the beginning of life. Nigerian scholars have variously, as have others examined the connection between multilingualism and interference; we avail ourselves of such studies in situating our reflections.

Egonu (1972) attributes such problems as are discussed here to the learner’s age, temperament, aptitude and previous knowledge. Reference is also made to the teacher’s lack of knowledge of the learner’s mother-tongue, thus rendering him ill-equipped to localize and help to stamp out the incidence of inhibitive transfers. For Eleberi (1983), students commit error mostly in agreement, conjugation, spelling, accents and wrong use of words.

The English language learning environment

The English Language learning environment encompasses everything the language learner hears and sees in the language. It may include a wide variety of situation such as exchanges in restaurants and stores, conversations with friends, reading street signs and newspapers, as well as classroom activities, or

it may be very sparse, including only language classroom activities a few books. Regardless of the learning environment, the learner's goal is mastery of the target language which is English Language. The learner begins the task of learning English Language as a second language from point zero (or close to it) and, through the steady accumulation of the mastered entities of the target language, eventually amasses them in quantities sufficient to constitute a particular level of proficiency (Dulay et al., 1982; Ellis, 1994).

This characterization of language learning entails the successful mastery of steadily accumulating structural entities and organizing this knowledge into coherent structures which lead to effective communication in the target language (Rutherford, 1987). If this is the case, then we would expect that well-formed accurate and complete target language structures would, one after another, emerge on the learner's path towards eventual mastery of the language. If the learner went on to master the language, we could, in principle, tabulate the expansion of his/her repertoire up to the point where all of the well-formed structures of the target language had been accounted for (Beardsmore, 1982; Halliday, 1964). Where English language sentences are made, they are of difficulty for second language users of English Language who have tonal Language. This is one of the major problems encountered by learners of English Language. Other areas of problem encountered are, sentence and word stresses, vowel sounds and English supra-segmental of pitch.

Second language learners appear to accumulate structural entities of the target language but demonstrate difficulty in organizing this knowledge into appropriate, coherent structures. There appears to be a significant gap between the accumulation and the organization of the knowledge. This then raises critical questions – what kinds of language do second language learners produce in speaking and writing? When writing or speaking the target language (L2), second language learners tend to rely on their native language (L1) structures to produce a response. If the structures of the two languages are distinct different,

then one could expect a relatively high frequency of errors to occur in L2, thus indicating an interference of L1 on L2 (Dechert, 1983).

Language transfer (also known as L1 interference, linguistic interference, and cross meaning) refers to speakers or writers applying knowledge from their native language to a second language. There has been much debate upon the importance of the second language interference. Scholars still argue if this interference is beneficial for both teachers and learners or not. According to some scholars, the transfer can be positive when knowing one language can aid in developing skills for a second language. Alternatively, others claim that the transfer can be negative when understanding one complicates the understanding of another language.

Language contact in multilingual society

Language contact occurs when two or more languages or varieties interact. The study of language contact is called contact linguistics. Multilingualism has likely been common throughout much of history and today most people in the world are multilingual. When speakers of different languages interact closely, it is typical for their languages to influence each other. Language contact can occur at language acting as either a superstratum or a substratum. Language contact occurs in a variety of phenomena, including language convergence, borrowing and relexification. The most common products are pidgins, creoles, code switching, and mixing languages. Other hybrid languages do not strictly fit into any of these categories (Thomason, 2001).

Dulay et al (1982) define interference as the automatic transfer, due to habit, of the surface structure of the first language onto the surface of the target language. Lott (1983) defines interference as ‘errors in the learner’s use of the foreign language that can be traced back to the mother tongue’. Ellis (1994) refers to interference as ‘transfer’, which he says is the influence that the learner’s L1 exerts over the acquisition of an L2’. He argues that transfer is governed by

learner's perceptions about what is transferable and by their stage of development in L2 learning. In learning a target language, learners construct their own interim rules (Selinker, 1972; Seliger, 1988; Ellis, 1994) with the use of their L1 knowledge, but only when they believe it will help them in the learning task or when they have become sufficiently proficient in the L2 for transfer to be possible.

Ellis (1994) raises the need to distinguish between errors and mistakes and makes an important distinction between the two. He says that errors reflect gaps in the learner's knowledge; they occur because the learner does not know what is correct. Mistakes reflect occasional lapses what he or she knows. It appears to be much more difficult for an adult to learn a second language system that is as well learned as the first language. Typically, a person learns a second language partly in terms of the kinds of meanings already learned in the first language (Whorf, 1956; Albert & Obler, 1978; Larson-Freeman & Long, 1991). Beebe (1988) suggests that in learning a second language, L1 responses are grafted on to L2 responses, and both are made to a common set of meaning responses. Other things being equal, the learner is less fluent in L2, and the kinds of expressions he/she uses in L2 bear telltale of the structure of L1.

Carroll (1964) argues that the circumstances of learning a second language are like those of a mother tongue. Sometimes there are interferences and occasionally responses from one language system will intrude into speech in the other language. It appears that learning is most successful when the situations in which the two languages (L1 and L2) are learned, are kept as distinct as possible (Faerch & Kasper, 1983). To successfully learn L2 requires the L2 learner to often preclude the L1 structures from the L2 learning process, if the structures of the two languages are distinctly different. This project work will examine the influence of interference on the learning of the English Language in a multilingual society with particular reference to Oluyole Local government.

Multilingualism is a situation in which two or more languages operate within the same context (Ndimele, 2003). Factors such as political annexation

marital relation, economic transaction, cultural association, educational acquisition and religious affiliation bring about multilingualism. The advent of English colonialists in the 18th Century brought about linguistic imperialism, a situation in which according to Asne as cited in Faniola.

[T]he minds and lives of the speakers of a language are dominated by another language to the point where they believe they can and should use only the foreign language when it comes to transaction dealing with the advanced aspects of life such as education, philosophy, literature, government, the administration of justice.

When Nigeria attained her political independence in 1960, this has to be sustained for her interest. This is because there was no indigenous language that could perform the function of English because of the mutual suspicion of, and ethnic consciousness among virtually all Nigerians. At the height of it all, the truth was revealed about the new state of the nation that no indigenous language is acceptable for all Nigerians. This view as captured by Nida & Wonderly (1971) “In Nigeria, there is simply no politically neutral language. In fact, the division into three major regions reflects the three poles: Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. The political survival of Nigeria as a country would even be more seriously threatened that is if any of these three languages were promoted by the government as being the one national language” (p. 65).

Acquisition of multiple language

Chomsky (1957) brought to the fore the notion of universal grammar claiming that human learning in general and language acquisition in particular are explainable in terms of an innate human capacity aiding the generation of an infinite number of sentence patterns. Hence, the innate learners’ rule formation capacity is restored to in another language acquisition, i.e. the learners from hypotheses about target language rules and test them in practice. Cenoz (1997)

points out that although multilingual acquisition is often considered as a variation of bilingualism and SLA, it is in fact more complex than that latter because it depends not only on the factors and processes involved in SLA but also on the interactions between the multiple languages being learned. It is upon that “bridge” of such interactions that target surface or deep structure of the multiple language influence and get influenced either by negative or positive change. Moreover, Cenoz (1997) explains that there is also more diversity and complexity in multilingual acquisition if we consider other factors such as the age when the different languages are acquired, the environment in which each of the languages is acquired, or the typological distance among the languages involved. More importantly the interactions between the L1, L2 and L3, which may be envisaged as a triad, are reciprocal; whereas, those between L1 and L2, L1 and L3 are probably best visualized as unidirectional if L1 is the learner’s native language because whatever influence L2 and L3 might exert on the mother tongue it might be less significant when compared to the influence of L1 on L2 and L3

According to Cenoz & Jessner (2000) there are at least four possibilities with L3 acquisition orders: (i) the three languages are acquired one after the other (L1-L2-L3); (ii) L2 and L3 are acquired simultaneously after L1 (L1-L2/L3); (iii) L1 and L2 are acquired simultaneously before L3 (L1/L2-L3), and (iv) the learner is in simultaneously contact with the three languages L1/L2/L3).

Roles of English in Nigerian multilingual society

English is now the major communication and learning tool; the access or window to development in the world-be it political, cultural, economic, social, or technological. English, in Nigeria is the language inherited from their colonial master (the British). Adetuyi & Jegede (2016) traced the origin of bilingualism to colonization, trade, annexation, conquest and borderlines. All these accounted for the introduction and dominance of English language on the culture and administration of Nigeria. Studies have shown that when bilinguals

speakers code switch, they switch from language to language with ease and fluency, following the syntactic and semantic rules of both languages (Tamunobel-ema, 2015)

Given the multilingual setting of Nigeria (over 400 indigenous languages and dialects), English became the lingua franca for administration, education, mass media, commerce, etc. English is the first and second language of most Nigerians after their mother tongue. According to Adetuyi & Jegede (2016), the over 400 languages in Nigeria have been categorized in different ways by scholars, based on the parameters of sequence of acquisition, number of speakers and roles assigned to languages with the following labels: (a) *dominant language*: English; (b) *majority languages*: Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba; (c) *minority languages*: Angos, Edo, Efik, Tiv, Fulfude, Kanuri, etc. (p. 186).

Whenever a group of Nigerians meet and find that they do not share common languages, say Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Edo, e.t.c. they choose to interact in English. Thus, English serves as the lingua franca, a unifying force among the various ethnic groups, the medium of instructions in schools, the means of communication with the outside world, the language of the mass media, and the language of law, commerce and industry. It is obvious from these uses of English in Nigeria that the language at least for now, is very important tool for communication. Subsequently, Proficiency in both spoken and written forms of the language is vital. Adebite's (2003) functional classification of Nigerian languages is presented in Table 1.

This is the basis of Olaore's (1992) suggestion that we: "include... in the country's language policy the fact that for a long time to come English will continue to play a prominent role in the socio-economic and political development of Nigeria as the language of administration, politics industry, education, science and technology" (p.21). Therefore, English for development is a 'sine qua non' for tapping, exploring and exploiting local and foreign resources.

Table 1. Status of languages in Nigeria

Status	Languages	Roles
Level V	English	National and International Roles
Level IV	Regional Lingua francas, used in network news	Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba
Level III	Pidgin English Restricted	Lingua franca
Level II	Edo, Efik, Fulfide, Idomalgala, Ijaw, Kanuri, Nupe, Tiv	Ethnic language used in network news
Level I	Other minor languages	Ethnic or sub-ethnic roles

According to Babajide (2001) English is used in Nigeria in most situations: home, office, market etc. and for all communication interaction: formal and, informal, cordial, casual etc. he states further:

[G]iven the many important roles that English languages performs, it becomes expedient for any Nigerian that wants to be relevant to his social, economic, and political environment to learn and acquire some appreciable knowledge of English. This explains why both the literate and non-literate have a great respect for anyone who has an admirable proficiency in English. In fact, educated Nigerians who are deficient in their mastery of English and some of the uneducated lot make frantic efforts through private tuition to learn it (p. 4).

Jowitt (1991) submits that it is likely that English will also remain an official language in Nigeria for a long time to come and it will probably continue to have much the same functions as at present. Alo (2004) highlights a variety of important functions of the English language in Nigeria: (a) official language; (b) the lingua franca among educated Nigerians; (c) the medium of instruction in secondary and tertiary institution, including the last three years of primary education; (d) a school subject; (e) the principal of wider communication, business, commerce, industry, public administration; (f) the language of science and

technology; (g) an instrument of national, state and local politics; (h) a medium of creative expression.

Conclusion

It is important to note that English also serves the purpose of uniting the various ethnic groups which makes Nigeria a multilingual society. On the importance of English as a language that unifies the different ethnic groups in Nigeria, Afolayan (1968) posits: it is unrealistic for anybody in Nigeria today to think that national unity can be forged in the country without recourse to the utilization of the English language; it has been the language of the creation of the political entity itself, and also the language of its political-economic unification and administration... Furthermore, the fact that it is now functioning as the language of Nigerian nationalism cannot be denied. Thus, English is the principal lingua franca of educated Nigerians, the principal medium of instruction in schools, the principal languages of wider communication, and the principal medium of literary expression.

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