A SURVEY OF PARENTS' PREFERENCE FOR ENGLISH IN NIGERIAN HOMES WITH LAGOS AS CASE STUDY

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Introduction

Language is an environment. A child born and bred in a particular environment is likely to understand that environment better than another child born and raised elsewhere, and later brought to live in the environment of the first child. Following the logic of this argument, it is reasonable to conclude that the child's first language or mother-tongue is perfectly capable of influencing, to a considerable extent, his or her worldview and attitude to life. Language, then, is part of individual identity and personality, in addition to being a cultural emblem. Hence, attempts to impose a foreign language on a people usually meet with spontaneous resistance and hostility. According to Olukiran (2001:35), it amounts to enslavement if you deprive a people of their indigenous language. The Algerian situation provides a useful point of reference here. The ethnic Berbers (who constitute a third of the country's population) were once up in arms against the Algerian government, for the several years of the Arabic Language being imposed on them, since the seventh century Arab invasion. Their own language, *Tamazight*, was subsequently relegated to the background.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'O (1981) gives a further insight into what language can mean to a people, in the following words:

> Language thus comes to embody both continuity and change in that historical consciousness (of a people). It is this aspect of language, as a collective memory-bank of a given people, which has made some people ascribe mystical independence to language. It is this same aspect which has made nations and peoples take up arms to prevent a total annihilation or assimilation of their languages, because it is tantamount to annihilating their collective memory-bank of past achievements and failures which form the basis of their common identity. It is like uprooting that community from history (59-60).

The Algerian experience which relegated the indigenous language has been replicated in other parts of Africa where English and French have suppressed the languages of their colonial subjects. In Nigeria, for example, not only is English the official language, it is also fast spreading as a domestic language and widely spoken in many homes. Many Nigerian children now display amazingly greater competence in English than in any of the indigenous languages. But Imeh Ikiddeh warns that whatever the level of competence in the use of English, and the vigour of our energies in its promotion, the bitter truth remains that it is the language of conquest and, therefore, of imposition.

Language, Thought and Culture

The earlier assumption that language, thought and culture are independent variables has yielded place to a more recent consensus that the three aspects are parts of a whole. Merril Valdes (1986:1) underscores this point by stating that thought in the real sense is very difficult to express without an underlying value system understood by both the sender and the receiver in a communication process. The scholar states further that while an artificial language may be a politically wise choice for inter-cultural communication because it is offensive to no one, it is, on the other hand, a poor choice for a more basic reason, which is that no one can *feel* or, therefore, *think* deeply in an artificial language (Emphasis mine.)

Boas (1986:7) equally reasons that the conciseness and clarity of thought of a people depend largely on their language. The position being advanced here is that thought and expression are both enhanced when done in an indigenous tongue than in a borrowed or foreign language, since environmental factors are critical to the acquisition of language skill. This is why Karl Heinz (1978) advises foreign language teachers to relate to the immediate environment, and adopt the use of familiar examples relevant to the experience of the learner. Since language is a vehicle of culture and tradition, it follows logically that each language spoken by a people is a product of a particular tradition and culture, with peculiar phenomena. Hence, in Nigeria, English remains a foreign language based on the English culture and society, no matter how proficient or eloquent the Nigerian user of the language is.

Sociolinguists, such as Danko (2001:32), however, are quick to point out that any language is capable of conveying any culture, just as any culture can convey any language. This sounds a logical position to take, but only superficially. The fact that one is capable of speaking the language of another culture does not confer on one the same depth of cultural understanding as the original owners of the language. This cultural misunderstanding is demonstrated in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. In spite of the explanations given to Mr Pilkings on the tradition of the king's horseman dying with the king for the spiritual cleansing of the land, the white man fails to be persuaded by what is simply an act of suicide in his own culture. On the contrary, the son of the king's horseman, Olunde, comes home from England for his father's burial rites, in spite of his exposure to the white man's culture. Thus, language bears a close relationship with thought and culture. Even the scientific culture, as Robert Kaplan (1986:16) has demonstrated, has lexical and semantic implications for the development of the English Language.

Children's attitude towards Language

Language remains the basic tool for the acculturation of the child, through which he or she comes to terms with the values, norms and traditions of his or her environment. The language a child grows up to speak, therefore, determines the child's world-view and total personality. By their impressionable nature, children pick up languages faster than the adults who often need to be taught formally. As pointed out earlier, English is fast becoming a domestic language in Nigeria, and the ability of a child to speak fluently in English now appears to be the barometer for measuring his or her cognitive power and linguistic development. While not necessarily canvassing for the displacement of English as the most widely spoken language in cosmopolitan Nigeria, attention should be drawn to this accelerated devaluation of our indigenous languages in favour of English.

Apart from being the country's official language, English is also the language of the school, religion, social interaction and domestic communication in many Nigerian homes. This has socio-cultural and moral implications for the nation as a whole since every language supposedly has a moral content. As opposed to English,

many Nigerian languages contain expressions of respect to adults and to socially superior persons. For instance, while the English pronoun 'you' can be both singular and plural, in Yoruba, a distinction is made between *iwo* ('you' singular) and *eyin* ('you' plural). However, the point being made here is that *eyin* also functions as a singular word to demonstrate the speaker's respect or reverence for the person being addressed. In other words, *eyin* is often used in the singular as an honorific pronoun for the elderly or the socially superior. A Yoruba child who is brought up speaking English may miss that aspect of the culture, and possibly face culture crisis arising from the linguistic conflict, thus affecting his or her moral upbringing.

A look at many Nigerian children in the big cities reveals a near-total Europeanisation and Americanisation of values, attitudes and disposition, and this is attributable to the widespread use of English as a domestic language at the expense of the indigenous languages. This leads Imeh Ikiddeh (1983:66) to observe that, in spite of our growing familiarity with English, the cultural artifacts of which the language is an essential part, the social attitudes inspired by it, its sound system, its intonation patterns, its rhythms in speech and writing, its idioms of seriousness and humour, all these factors have always been somewhat foreign to our nature and environment. Where the English Language completely overshadows the indigenous language spoken in the immediate environment, the child may end up being monolingual.

Apparently to forestall this unwholesome development, the Nigerian government provides the following guidelines in respect of the pre-primary education:

> To achieve the above objectives, Government will ensure that the medium of instruction (that is, in Pre-Primary Schools) will be principally the mother tongue, the language of the immediate community (*National Policy on Education*, 1981:10)

If fully implemented, this policy would have, over time, positioned Nigerian children for a robust bilingual education, with many social benefits to the nation and her citizens. Edwards (1984) defines bilingual education as education in which two languages are used within the school. He goes further to identify two models: the *transitional* and the *maintenance* models of bilingual education. In

the former, the plan is to phase out one language while the mainstream language develops; in the latter, both languages are kept throughout a child's schooling experience. Transitional programmes are often concerned with assimilation; maintenance programmes with pluralism, enrichment, language restoration and biculturalism. In Canada and Wales, for instance, English speakers are taught French or Welsh respectively to enable them function bilingually. In Tanzania and Kenya, Swahili and English are used as bilingual education tools. Countries such as China, Japan and India have successfully integrated their various indigenous languages for cultural and technological gains, and one begins to wonder why it has been so difficult for Nigeria to achieve this feat. What factors are responsible for parents' increasing desire to enforce the English Language on their children at the domestic level? It was to provide answers to these questions that the present writer embarked on a random mini-survey in Lagos, the nation's megacity and commercial nerve centre, in June 1999.

The mini-survey in Lagos: Findings

The data for this mini-survey were obtained from fifty Nigerian parents at the Tafawa Balewa Square and Obalende bus stops in Lagos. Responses were tape-recorded to ensure that no detail was lost and to guarantee accuracy of transcription. Respondents were randomly interviewed on their disposition to the use of indigenous languages in schools and at home. The main hypothesis is that Nigerian parents in cosmopolitan centres increasingly encourage their children to use English at home at the expense of the indigenous languages. The survey was based on the following seven questions:

1. Are you a parent?
2. Do you speak any of Nigeria's indigenous languages?
3. How often do you speak the language?
4. Do you speak the language to your child or children?
5. How often do you speak the language to your child or children?
6. Do you feel inferior when your child communicates in an indigenous language?

7. Between a foreign language, such as English, and your indigenous language, which would you allow your child to learn first?

Out of the fifty respondents interviewed, forty-six provided answers to all the questions, while the remaining four did not go beyond the first question, obviously unwilling to proceed with the interview. Thus, it is the data obtained from the forty-six cooperative respondents that have been used for the analysis which follows:

TABLE 1

IDENTITY OF RESPONDENTS (PARENT/NON-PARENT)

YES	%	NO	%	TOTAL	%
46	100	0	0	**46**	**100**

All the fifty respondents interviewed for the study happened to be parents, but four of them declined to be part of the survey. Thus forty-six parents constituted the focus group for the study.

TABLE 2

RESPONDENTS' ATTITUDE TO SPEAKING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

YES	%	NO	%	TOTAL	%
35	76.1	11	23.9	**46**	**100**

Thirty-five (76.1%) respondents claimed to speak peculiar indigenous languages, while eleven (23.9%) claimed not to speak any of the languages. Some of the factors responsible are identified below.

TABLE 3

FREQUENCY OF USE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

OFTEN	%	NOT OFTEN	%	NOT AT ALL	%	TOTAL	%
25	54.4	10	21.8	11	23.9	**35**	**76.8**

Total Number of Respondents: 46

Results presented in Table 3 above show that 25 respondents (54.4%) said that in spite of residing in cosmopolitan Lagos, they still speak their indigenous languages often, 10 respondents (21.8%) do not often speak in their indigenous languages, while 11 respondents (23.9%) do not speak any of the indigenous languages at all.

TABLE 4

USE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN

YES	%	NO	%	TOTAL	%
35	76.1	11	23.9	**46**	**100**

Thirty-five (76.1%) respondents speak to their children in indigenous languages, while eleven (23.9%) do not.

TABLE 5
FREQUENCY OF USE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN

OFTEN	%	NOT OFTEN	%	TOTAL	%
35	76.1	11	23.9	**46**	**100**

Of the 35 respondents who speak their indigenous languages, whether often or not, 14 (representing 40.0%) speak often to their children in indigenous languages, while 21 (representing 60.0%) do not often speak to their children in these languages.

TABLE 6
PARENTS' RECEPTION OF CHILDREN'S USE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

YES	%	NO	%	TOTAL	%
05	10.9	41	89.1	**46**	**100**

Results as presented in Table 6 above show that five respondents (10.9%) claim to feel uncomfortable if they hear their children

communicate with others in indigenous languages, while forty-one (89.1%) do not see anything abnormal about that.

TABLE 7
PARENTS' FIRST CHOICE BETWEEN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

ENGLISH	%	INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES	%	TOTAL	%
35	76.1	11	23.9	**46**	**100**

Results in Table 7 present an interesting pattern. In spite of the position of forty-one (89.1%) respondents in Table 6 that they do not feel uncomfortable about their children's use of the indigenous languages, thirty-nine parents (representing 84.7%) still prefer English as their children's first language, at the expense of the indigenous languages. Some of the factors responsible for this scenario have earlier been identified.

Comments, Observations, and Conclusion

It is observed that in an urban centre like Lagos, people rarely communicate in indigenous languages. Apart from English, which is the official language, the Pidgin English is also widely used. This situation further compounds the neglect that indigenous languages suffer. Results presented in Table 2 show that thirty-five (76.1%) respondents claim to still speak their indigenous languages despite the daily influence of English and Pidgin. These respondents may have been brought up speaking the indigenous languages first, ahead of English, or grown up where the influence of these languages is very strong. Furthermore, their parents might not have felt strongly about the use of English.

Those who grew up during the period immediately before and after independence when the nationalistic fervour was very strong, and emphasis was placed on traditional and cultural values, must have been positively influenced into speaking their indigenous languages. However, eleven (23.9%) respondents who claim not to speak in any indigenous language, may have been born or brought up in urbarn centres where the use of these languages is not so dominant. Some of them may have been raised in elitist

environments where the use of English is regarded as a status symbol.

Those who claim to speak indigenous languages often may have been brought up to speak those languages first, ahead of English. Where spouses of the respondents are from the same linguistic backgrounds, their particular indigenous languages readily become the respective domestic languages, often times flourishing alongside English. The ten (21.8%) respondents who claim not to use the indigenous languages often might have moved away from the indigenous language environment where they were being initially brought up, into an area where English is dominant. Their children might grow up speaking English almost exclusively. Lack of frequent visit home, in addition to office and school environments where English is dominant are other factors which contribute to the neglect of the indigenous languages. From nursery to tertiary institutions, English is the official language of instruction in Nigeria. Imeh Ikiddeh (1983) laments that in Nigeria,

> Pre-primary education of children, aged 3 to 5 plus, is one area which the government has sadly left in the hands of private individuals and organisations, and the so-called international schools which cater for education at this level invariably use English as the medium of instruction (69).

On the other hand, those who speak the indigenous languages may have brought up their children to speak those languages first, before English, which they fully come in contact with at school. Children from such homes are likely to be bilingual, with all the benefits attached to that status.

Indigenous languages may not thrive in situations of cross-cultural marriages where English becomes a compromise domestic language, except in very rare cases where one of the couple (quite often the wife) vigorously imbibes the spouse's own language. The children end up speaking whatever emerges as the domestic language.

The concept of globalisation has further entrenched English as the dominant domestic language, with educated parents who see themselves first and foremost as citizens of the world. This sense of internationalism naturally raises the status of the English Language at the expense of the indigenous languages. Countries like Japan,

China, Afghanistan, France, and Germany have taken measures to protect their indigenous languages in the face of the threat posed by English. But in Nigeria, we still have many parents who discourage the use of the indigenous languages, which they regard as belonging to those with lower social status. Such parents invariably adopt English as the domestic language, and their children grow up under that influence.

Bilingual competence in English and one indigenous language is capable of enhancing a child's latent intellectual ability and creative potential. The writings of Nigeria's Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, manifest a profound influence of his indigenous language, tradition and culture. Similarly, Abiola Irele (1983) identifies the remarkable influence of the indigenous language on Leopold Sedar Senghor, another African literary giant and politician. He writes as follows:

> The fact that Senghor did not begin his French education until the age of seven, and of his previous cultural conditioning within an African environment...came to give a poignant quality of his later assimilation of Western learning and culture. Early introduced to the customs and traditions of his ethnic group, the Sere of the Sine-Saloum basin, Senghor developed an effective relation with a form of the indigenous African way of life which has left an indelible imprint on his profound being (149).

Contrary to the widespread misconception that proficiency in the indigenous language is a sign of intellectual weakness and backwardness, many great writers and philosophers from Classical time to the modern era generated their profound ideas in languages indigenous to them – Greek, Latin, French, German, English, and so on. Indigenous languages also promote indigenous cultural values and folklore, capable of enhancing a country's socio-political development. What is desirable, therefore, for the Nigerian child, is the 'maintenance bilingual education' postulated by Edwards (1984), where English continues to be employed alongside the indigenous language dominant in a specific locality. Cummings and Mulcehy (1978) cite a number of studies suggesting that the further a child progresses towards a balanced and proficient bilingualism, the greater the probability of cognitive advantages.

The media also have a crucial role to play. To satisfy the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nature of cosmopolitan Lagos, radio

and television stations produce and transmit programmes mostly in English. Apart from Lagos Television, Radio Lagos, NTA Channel 10 and MITV, other broadcast channels in Lagos transmit just a few programmes in indigenous languages. But the media should borrow a leaf from the SBS Radio and TV in Australia, which is also a multi-cultural society, like Nigeria. The SBS Handbill for 2001 reads as follows:

> Every hour, SBS Radio broadcasts in a different language. And from one programme to the next, SBS TV skips across a kaleidoscope of cultures. SBS reflects today's multi-cultural Australia for Australians. SBS Radio is heard nationally and broadcasts 650 hours of programming each week in *68 languages*, with 600 international and local programme sources. SBS TV broadcasts half of its scheduled programmes in more than *60 languages other than English* (Emphasis mine).

To redress the imbalance created by the dominance of English as a domestic language, all hands must be on deck. All the social institutions involved in moulding the child – the home (where the foundation is laid), the school (for formal education), the government (through a well-articulated educational policy), and the media (through the promotion of indigenous languages) – should work in concert to ensure a balanced cultural education for the Nigerian child. Anything short of this may result in foreign language values transforming our own children into foreigners right on their soil.

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