



## A comparative study of users attitudes towards english and indigenous Nigerian languages

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### Abstract

Nigeria is indeed a multilingual nation where three categories of languages are in operation- the endoglossic, the exoglossic and the endo-exoglossic languages. The endoglossic languages are the indigenous languages which Bamgbose (24) puts at about four hundred in number and Adegbija puts at over five hundred. The exoglossic languages are the languages imported into Nigeria. Paramount in this category are English, French and Arabic. The third category in Nigeria is the endo-exoglossic language which is Nigerian Pidgin. These different languages in Nigeria present different attitudes. Language attitudes are affected by several factors triggered off by overt and covert responses. Some people show negative attitude to the use of a language mainly because they want to show identity, protect their culture or because of their incompetence in its learning. On the other hand, some show positive attitude to the use of a language as a result of penalty involved or the instrumental forces attached. For example, good performance in English in the educational sector is an instrumental force for promotion to the next class. Likewise, ability to speak English fluently is a yardstick in an ideal work setting for allocating officers to some juicy duty posts. Language is thus a sensitive social phenomenon. It attracts conscious and unconscious reactions to its use by the individual or community, especially in a multilingual setting like Nigeria. This paper, therefore, examines the different language attitudes of Nigerians, especially with reference to English and the indigenous languages. It comes out with an evaluative judgment on why the English Language has stood the test of time in a multilingual nation like Nigeria.

**Keywords:** multilingual, language attitude, endoglossic, exoglossic, endo-exoglossic

### Introduction

#### What is language Attitudes?

Language attitudes are the feelings people have about their own language variety or language varieties of others.

In a more definitive sense, language, according to Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'is a system of conventional, spoken or written symbols by means of which human beings as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves'.

The concept 'attitude' is defined as the way in which a person thinks, (cognitive component) feels (affective component) and intends to behave (conative component) towards something. It is the summation of the three components that is emphasized for determining the overall attitude and not a particular component. (Rajecki 33)

*Languages attitudes, therefore, are actually the feelings people have, about their own language or the languages of others, and further defined, as an individual's psychological construction regarding their own language or the languages of others (crystal 1)*

Research in attitude studies shows that a number of theories focus on two major competing approaches, the 'mentalist' and the 'behaviourist' views of attitude. The mentalist view is the most represented one and has three components, 'cognitive' (individual belief system, knowledge and perceptions) 'affective' (emotional reactions and feelings) and conative (behavioural intentions and interest) (Lambert 274).

Fasold (PP147-148) posits that most language attitude works are based on a mentalist view of attitude as "a state of

readiness, an intervening variable between a stimulus affecting a person and that person's response". The mentalists identify instrumental motivation as a pointer of language attitudes. An instrumental attitude is identified when the learners study a language in order to fulfill material needs, but have not the need of being part of the culture related to that language. In a social context, human beings develop positive attitude to an attractive language. This kind of attitude is described as self-oriented and individualistic as it overlaps with the need for achievement or a particular personal goal. Gardner and Lambert (105) submit that instrumental motivation indicates pragmatic and utilitarian motives and it is characterized by the desire to gain social recognition or economic advantage. Agheyisi and Fishman (130) opine that the mentalists see motivation as being instrumental when an individual can receive personal benefits from the language learning process and when that could statistically influence linguistic performance.

This kind of attitude is found among Nigerians. There is that interest in individuals to learn English, the prestigious Language, to improve their socio-economic status in the polity. The following submission corroborates the above observation:

*The result of language attitude research in African tends towards the mentalist orientation as they reveal that the major attraction, pull and motivation for learning European languages seem largely to hinge on their potent instrumental value (Adegbija 52)*

The behaviourist orientation explains language attitude from the viewpoint of overt and observable responses to social situations. Their perspectives select the actual choice of one language instead of another for purposes of learning and interaction. The behaviourist believes that a multilingual is motivated to prefer one language to another, especially his mother tongue or native language to his second language. According to Agheyisi and Fishman (139)

"To the behaviourist, attitude goes hand in hand with the situation and can, therefore, no longer be generalised but develops towards a dependent concept"

Thus, Agheyisi and Fishman highlight the fact that the behaviourists identify with the integrative attitudes to language learning. In integrative perspective, language attitude is characterized with some desire and behaviour of the learners to integrate themselves with the language being learnt. Learners with this attitude not only learn a language to have proficiency in it, but also wish to know, imitate or adapt themselves to the culture related to the speakers of the language. This type of attitude is social and interpersonal and it is conceptually linked with the need for cultural affiliation.

According to Adekunle (62) "there are centripetal forces reflecting the desire for culture and language self-determination. Such attitude is integrative, identification and positive to the indigenous language". The attitude is inward looking and finds expression in the demand for language policy and usage to focus on the development of the indigenous languages. Natural identity and preservation of local culture can only be achieved through the indigenous languages.

### **Attitudinal patterns of Nigerians to English and indigenous Languages**

Nigeria is a multidimensional society and vast are the geographical areas, cultures, population, languages, beliefs etc. In particular, Nigeria is a multilingual nation that came into existence in 1914 as a result of the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates. There are various views about the number of languages in Nigeria. According to Bamgbose (24) "There are about 400 native languages in Nigeria". Adebija (45) however posits that "Nigeria alone has between 450-500 languages". The existing multiplicity of languages has been in use by the natives before the implantation of English, the language of the British colonial masters. This, however, does not suggest that the English language came into Nigeria in 1914. According to the argument of Ogu (67), quoted by Babajide (3), "The exact advent of the English Language in Nigeria is not recorded, neither do we know the first Nigerian to speak the English Language. There is, however, the certainty that Nigeria was already in contact with Europe as early as 1472. Still in support of this position is Ajayi's (89-90) report that Hope Waddel found very intelligent journals on the affairs of this country kept by its rulers, written in English of so old a date as 1767.

Consequently the English Language has, for a long time, been implanted in Nigeria and has joined the multiplicity of other languages to function in the Nigerian context. The English Language in Nigeria today is no longer foreign but rather domesticated or nativised. This view is further supported by Akindele and Adegbite (69).

"There is no gainsaying the fact that English has become a Nigeria Language. The language has become an invaluable

legacy of the British which has provided Nigerians with yet another means of expressing their culture".

Thus, English Language and about 500 native languages have been in use in Nigeria as means of communication in various contexts. The remarkable thing, however, is the dominance of English in all areas especially where its use has seemingly made it a sine qua non to the survival of individuals in the nation as well as to the developmental objectives of Nigeria (Oyetade 16).

It is quite clear that all edicts, laws, governmental policy decisions, tax forms and all those things crucial to the life of every Nigerian citizen are first handed down in English. In the area of science and technology, which is crucial for the progress of any nation, the role of English is incontrovertible. It is nationally recognized as the veritable vehicle for the transmission of science and technological concepts. Oluikpe (99) stated that English is seen as a general language in the sense that it is the language different people from different tongue use as a means of communication especially under the colonization of the British. English Language occupies a significant position among all the subjects being taught in all educational institutions in Nigeria. Nigeria has taken the English Language to be its lingua Franca, that is, a language generally accepted and used considering its many tribes.

Onah (45) opines that English Language enjoys a lot of prestige over other Nigerian Languages. A credit in English Language has become mandatory for transition from primary to secondary school and from secondary school to tertiary institution. English bestows some status on whoever speaks it fluently. Education in Nigeria is synonymous with good command of the language. It is no longer viewed as a temporarily borrowed language but has been accepted as part of our linguistic property (Ozohili 98). In Nigeria, it is the official language, the language of unity, education, law, commerce and industry, mass media, sports and social mobility. Ogunsiji (109) submits that, "As the language of administration in Nigeria, serious government affairs at the third tier of government are conducted in English". Government policies and official publications are made in English and the Nigerian constitution is also written in English. For anybody to play some meaningful roles in the present political dispensation in the country, the person should have a fairly reasonable mastery of the English language.

The English language in Nigeria and indeed in Africa is playing the role of international connection. Many Nigerians want to travel abroad. They need to be able to speak the English language to function over there. Hence, Nigerians aspire to master the use of the language and thus be positive to its learning and use.

The above dominance by the English Language in function or role over the indigenous languages has no doubt called for different attitudinal patterns by Nigerians. Every man or group of people react in quite different ways to different things, ideas, events, policies, languages etc. By broad classifications, such attitudes or reactions are either negative or positive. Babajide (86) posits that:

In Language situation as obtainable in Nigeria, people tend to be more positively disposed to using (both in speech and writing) a language that has instrumental value as follows: a considerable national/or international coverage of users, a metropolitan or cosmopolitan status, a considerable numerical strength and some measure of

economic and political power and a sufficiently reliable codified form.

On the other hand, a language attracts negative attitudes from people when it is restricted in use to few native speakers; a mere vernacular, not yet codified, associated only with reality, irrelevant to the socio-economic and political needs of the people. In the submission of Adebija (41) English language in Nigeria carries the characteristics of instrumentation and integration highlighted above and as such attracts highly positive attitudes from Nigerians while the indigenous languages represented by the three identified major indigenous languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) attract negative attitudes.

### **Factors that affect positive attitude to the English language in Nigeria.**

The factors determining positive attitudinal patterns to the English language are discussed as follows: first is the National Policy on Education. The National Policy on Education (144) stipulates that the Nigerian child shall in the first three years of Primary School be taught in the language of his immediate environment and at the later stage, English, and the mother tongue should be taught as a subject. What this means is that the Nigerian child should be taught in English after the first three years in the Primary School, the secondary school period and through to the University period of his life. The National Policy on education considers the English Language very paramount and essential in all its ramification. English is the language of "prestige per excellence". Every Nigerian child is quite positive to the English Language because it is the basic instrument for instruction in the classroom. The indigenous language is quickly used at the early stage of the child's life but quickly disappears except when it is taught as a subject.

The fact that the English Language has for long been performing High functions means that it has become entrenched in education and for official communication. By contrast, however, the fact that the indigenous languages have been denied such functions means that they are not associated with high functions. The low status given the indigenous languages in the area of education thus makes many Nigerians believe that the language can never function for example, in the expression of science and technology.

Another factor that determines positive attitude to the English Language in Nigeria is the national language issue. In the multilingual Nigerian context, the issue of national language has been very sensitive and controversial. This is not unconnected with the features the concept demands and the attitudes which users manifest towards them. The national language issue demands certain features. According to UNESCO (25) 'A language to be adopted as a national language should be a native and neutral language to all the linguistic groups adopting it'. Given the Nigerian situation, therefore, the national language should be chosen from among the four hundred indigenous languages (Bamgbose 24) or better still, one of the three languages (Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba) identified to be spoken by the majority of Nigerians.

This condition is seen as difficult in Nigeria and that is why Ogunsiji (16) concludes that "the national language issue in Nigeria is a sensitive and controversial one". The reason is that each speech community has a geographical boundary which sees her language as a mark of social identity. The selection of one as a national language over others would

bring in disagreement. The truth is that "no ethnic group wants to be subservient to another ethnic language because the promotion of the ethnic language connotes the promotion of the corresponding ethnic group itself (Jowitz 42). Labov (79) posits the need for every self-respecting nation to have a national language. This, however, seems not feasible in Nigeria. The English language, therefore, poses as the only neutral language for Nigeria and it is a symbol of national unity. It serves as a uniting force among Nigerians who do not share the same indigenous language. These basic dominant factors have helped to create a highly healthy and positive attitude to the English Language in a multilingual society like Nigeria.

Yet another factor determining positive attitude to language use is inter-ethnic communication. In multilingual contexts, intercultural communication in markets, social gatherings, places of worship, etc tend to be enhanced when the different cultural groups have languages that serve in the day-to-day social interactions. Such languages usually referred to as link languages, vehicular languages, lingua Franca, or languages of wider communication often overlap in function with official languages.

In many African countries, an effective language policy has not been formulated to perform the function of inter-ethnic communication. Hence, the English Language tends to strongly compete with indigenous languages in that regard. The English language, for example, in Nigeria, performs the role well despite the fact that it is spoken by the minority elite.

Positive attitude to language use is also determined by international communication factor. Language of international co-operation and communication is imperative because of contemporary international interdependence in several domains of life. In the areas of science and technology, tourism, world politics and diplomacy, economic interaction, the mass media and transportation, no single nation can claim independence from other nations. According to Adebija (94)

"The English Language has developed into the international language per excellence by virtue of the history surrounding its development in Britain, America and the third world".

The English Language in Africa and in Nigeria in particular, is playing the role of international connection. Since many Nigerians want to travel abroad, they need to be able to speak English so as to function properly in the native speaker's environment. Hence, Nigerians aspire to master the use of English and thus be positive to its learning and use. Education has been described as a life long process. It is an important and essential process of human life. Formal education process is a domain that should attract adequate language policy. This has been a sensitive issue in most multilingual societies. Adebija (32) has it that,

The language policy issue is most problematic, most multi-faceted, most economically involving and sometimes most politically charged and explosive.

This might have been the fear of past Nigerian leaders and policy makers that Nigeria today cannot boast of any verile language policy. Language policy matter surfaces briefly in the National Education Policy of the Nigerian Constitution.

A perusal of the policy reveals that the function of language of instruction is largely assigned to English at levels beyond Junior Primary Education. Thus the English Language is portrayed in the constitution as being very important and the attitudinal pattern of Nigerians to it is positive while

attitudes to the use of the indigenous Languages are significantly low and can be described as negative. The findings of Babajide (159) support this view as follows:

On the whole 70.63% (approximately) of the sampled population have stable, positive attitudes towards the use of English in almost all situations... Yoruba (18.75%) Igbo (21.25%), Hausa (9.38%) approximated), and others (21.25%).

### Conclusion

This study deals with language attitudes and consequently, language behaviour of Nigerians in a multilingual society. The English Language which is the only legacy left behind by the British colonial masters has enjoyed so much patronage in Nigeria. The dominance of the English Language in function or role over the indigenous languages is highly dependent on several factors ranging from historical, political, economic, ethnic, social, educational or religious. Nigeria believes so much in the language that has instrumental value.

However, the Government of Nigeria should strive towards creating an enabling environment for the indigenous languages, creating training centres where every civil servant or undergraduate must learn one or more indigenous languages other than his own mother tongue. Government may equally summon a national conference on the national language issue. It is believed that someday, a sustainable indigenous language would emerge as a national language for Nigeria.

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