

Language Policy and Minority Language Education in Nigeria: Cross River State Educational Experience

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Abstract

The politics of language is a very sensitive issue in Nigeria as language can hardly be detached from the apron strings of the people's senses of identity and loyalty. This paper examines the concept of language policy and planning in Nigeria and its implication for education in the minority languages, with emphasis on the languages of Cross River State. The study discovers that there is no robust and well-articulated language planning framework in the country but only a language provision of the National Policy on Education (NPE). This reinforces the operation of language in education planning process, which unfortunately does not guarantee or strengthen literacy in the indigenous languages especially the so-called minority languages of Nigeria. The paper goes ahead to recommend the development of a functional and articulate language policy framework which can arrest the imminent crisis of endangerment and extinction of the indigenous languages in Cross River State.

Key words: Minority language education; Cross River State; Nigeria; Language policy; Extinction of languages

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INTRODUCTION

There is no comprehensive census on Nigerian languages to date but there are varying accounts of the number of languages spoken in Nigeria by linguists and language experts based on approximations and estimations. Grimes (1996) puts the figure at 515, Blench and Crozier (1992) agreed on 440, Bendor-Samuel and Standford (1976) enumerated 394 among others. Out of this number, only 36 have approved orthographies while the development of orthographies for another 6 is on-going (based on the figures released by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC). The implication is that these 36 are the only languages with the prospects of literacy, literature and cultural expression. In spite of this potential, it is discovered that only a handful, possibly, Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa and a few others are actually languages of education in most Nigerian schools. In Cross River, a South Eastern State where this study is concerned, where over forty languages are spoken, only, one, Efik is taught, not as a medium of instruction but merely as a curriculum subject in a section of the state where it is spoken as the language of the immediate environment. Many other 'small' languages are on the verge of extinction given the problem of absence of social transmission and the impact of globalization and the new information/communication technology. In this paper, we examine the concepts of language policy and planning and situate them in the context of the minority indigenous languages in education, using the languages of Cross River State as our reference point. In the discussion that follows, we examine the language situation in Nigeria from the perspective of Nigeria languages in education.

THE LANGUAGE SITUATION IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is a culturally and linguistically heterogeneous society. Every language is classified as major, minor, micro-minor (Emananjo, 1985) or decamillionaire, millionaire and minor (Awonusi, 2007), and so on based on the population of speakers of these languages. Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are the major languages in the country. Awonusi (2007) refers to this category of languages as the decamillionaires given their multi-million speakers, and functioning as local lingua francas as well as regional or state languages in areas where they are spoken. He also identified the millionaire languages in Nigeria such as Efik, Edo, Ibibio, Fulfulde, Tiv, Idoma, Igala, Kanuri and Tiv. They have a minimum of about a million speakers and had been associated with the states where they are predominantly spoken. Categories of Nigerian indigenous languages referred to as minor or micro-minor languages (Emananjo, 1985), are the small splinter group languages which are mainly spoken by a handful of speakers mainly as domesticated languages. Outside their use at homes, they do not play any role in education or the media even within their immediate communities. The minor language, the third category, are used in localities as mother tongue but not in education or the media. In Cross River State, languages like Lokaa, Ubang, Agwagune, Bete, Kohumono, Leggbo and Kiong are so classified. A few of them are on the verge of extinction. In addition to this categorization, there is also the exoglossic or foreign languages like English, French and Arabic.

English is the constitutionally recognized official language in Nigeria. It is the language of education, legislation, media, business and administration. The high degree of diversity in the Nigerian linguistic landscape is a continued motivation for the use of English in the country's mainstream economic and socio-political spectra. French was recognized as an official language in the 1998 National Policy on Education (NPE) by the Sani Abacha-led military junta as a way of encouraging and promoting West African regional co-operation and trade concern. This is imperative because most of Nigeria's neighbours are Francophone countries like Benin Republic, Togo and Cameroon. Outside this official diplomatic grandstanding, French does not have the popular acceptance, influence and spread as an exoglossic language in Nigeria. It is mainly used within the educational domain as an examinable subject or a taught course especially in Colleges of Education and Universities. Arabic is the least influential among the foreign languages in Nigeria. It is mostly used in the Northern part of the country for education and regional communication. Awonusi (2007) argues that both French and the Arabic enjoy a less-privileged status and are non-vocational electives, having moved from being compulsory languages in first three years of secondary education.

The majority of Cross River State languages fall into the category of micro-minor. Our concern, therefore, is to highlight the plight of such languages in the light of the language policy and planning and make useful suggestions for their practical and ideological development. In the discussion that follows, we examined the status of Cross River languages.

THE STATUS OF CROSS RIVER STATE LANGUAGES

Cross River State is one of the South-Eastern States in Nigeria. It was created in 1976 by the Murtala Muhammed military junta. From it, Akwa Ibom State was created in 1987 by the Ibrahim Babangida military government. The original Cross River State is, therefore made up of 18 local government areas. The State is undoubtedly a heterogeneous society with each ethnic nationality thriving to strengthen its linguistic, social, cultural and political identity. However, there is multilayering of ethnic identities. For instance, the Kiong (Odukpani and Akamkpa) and Efut people (Calabar South) see themselves more as Efik, a dominant neighbouring language and culture. While Kiong has a handful of speakers (about 5,000), the Efut language is extinct. The last speaker of Usakedet (the language of the Efut people) died in 2001. In this way, both Kiong and Efut children speak Efik as their mother tongue and their cultural and ancestral heritage have been completely submerged by Efik (Mensah & Offiong, 2004).

A similar trend has also been observed of Mbembe speakers in Ikom and Yala. Historically, Mbembe is the predominant language in Obubra but given the impact of migration and communal or tribal wars and conflicts, the original stock of people are disintegrated or dispersed to found new homes and settlements in neighbouring places. The speakers of Mbembe in Ikom and Yala owe their ethnic affiliation to Ikom and Yala respectively but only identifies with the Mbembe speaking people linguistically. There are also instances where speakers of Agoi, a primary language in Yakurr Local government area, are also found in small groups in Biase, Akamkpa and Ikom which also account for multilayered identities.

There are about 40 languages in Cross River State, though this figure is still subject to scholarly debates. Grimes (2007) identifies 45 languages, Mensah & Offiong (2004) recognizes 48 and Crabb (1968) identifies 50. A major problem with the classification of Cross River State languages is the dichotomy between language and dialect. Ejagham language for instance, has well over twenty dialects across the state but a few scholars find it difficult to make this distinction and classify some dialects as languages. Efik is the only Cross River State language that is regarded as a millionaire language. It is spoken predominantly in Akpabuyo, Bakassi,

Calabar Municipality, Calabar South and Odukpani. It is also spoken as a second language in Akamkpa, Ikom, Ugep and in such places like Itu, Oron and Uruan. It is undeniably the most developed language in Cross River State. It is a language of education, not as a medium of instruction but an examinable subject in primary and post primary curriculum. It has a complete Bible translation, dictionaries, series and literature texts. It was examined in London General Certificate of Education (GCE) and later West Africa Examination Certificate (WAEC), GCE ordinary level from 1960-1987. It was the introduction of 6-3-3-4 system of education that dimmed the educational influence of Efik. Currently, it is strongly being considered to be reintroduced as an examinable subject for national examination by both WAEC and National Examination Council (NECO). The Efik language is also studied up to the University level precisely at the University of Uyo and Calabar. Efik also enjoys reputable coverage in the media houses especially in public enlightenment, entertainment and news broadcast. Bekwarra and Ejagham are other languages which are used in news translations and mass mobilization like the on-going voters registration exercise in the state. Bekwarra is spoken in Bekwarra, Yala and Ogoja axis of the State, which is in the far north, while Ejagham is spoken across the length and breadth of the state, Calabar Municipality, Akpabuyo, Odukpani, Akamkpa, Ikom, Etung and Ogoja. Apart from their role in the mass media, they are primarily domesticated languages just like the remaining small group languages. Mensah and Akpagu (2008) give the following developmental indices of Cross River State languages.

Corpus planning	Language
Orthography	Efik, Mbembe, Lokaa, Ejagham, Igede
Written text	Efik and Lokaa
Dictionary	Efik and Bokyi
Primers	Efik, Ejagham, Igede, Lokaa, Mbembe and Yala
Post primers	Efik, Bokyi and Kukelle
Complete Bible	Efik, Ejagham, Igede and Yala
New Testament	Bete, Mbembe, Lokaa, Bokyi and Bekwara
Descriptive work (thesis)	Efik, Ejagham, Bekwara, Bokyi, Mbembe, Bete, Yala, Leggbo and Lokaa
Literature	Efik, Igede, Mbembe and Yala
Newspaper	Efik and Bekwara
(Mensah & Akpagu 2008)	

From the above Table, it is evident that the majority of Cross River State languages still exist in oral traditions, hence, bereft of the benefits of written languages, particularly the promotion of literacy. It is also that apart from Efik and probably Igede, which is also dominantly spoken in Benue State, no other Cross River State language, is recommendable

for corpus planning by the Federal Government Agency like the NERDC as well as UNESCO. Cases in point include the development of metalanguage, bilingual dictionaries, the translation of the curriculum for early child education, census questionnaire and government information bulletins in these languages. In the following analysis, we examine language planning in Nigeria and the future of indigenous languages in Cross River State.

LANGUAGE PLANNING IN NIGERIA

We seek to understand language planning as a deliberate interventionist strategy aimed at improving and regulating existing languages across all possible domains of their use (Baldauf, 1994). In Nigeria there is no explicit and comprehensive national language policy but the documents for language planning are found in the 1979 and 1999 Constitutions and the National Policy on Education of 1981 (which was revised in 1998 to accommodate French as one of Nigeria's official languages). Awonusi (2007) maintains that the 1999 constitution (article 51 and 53 respectively) recommended that the business of the National Assembly in Nigeria be conducted in English, and, additionally, the three major languages whenever adequate arrangements can be made. According to Emenanjo (2000, p. 1) the National Policy on Education provides for:

- i. Mother tongue and/or language of the immediate community as the language of initial literacy at the pre-primary and primary levels, and of adult and non-formal education.
- ii. The three major (national) languages - Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as L2, as the languages of national culture and integration.
- iii. English - The official language - as the language of formal literacy, the bureaucracy, secondary and higher education, law court etc
- iv. Selected foreign languages especially French and Arabic, as languages of international communication and discourse. These are the languages for which language villages have been set up.

One of the important goals of this policy is the promotion of multilingualism as a national goal. A child will have to learn his mother tongue, a major Nigeria language and English at various levels of education. Those who study French or Arabic may have to learn up to four languages in their individual educational pursuits. The policy also imposes a major Nigerian language - Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba on children from other linguistic background, especially speakers of the minority languages, whose languages are only suited for early literacy. English is sustained as the language

of government, education, legislation, business and the mass media. French is accorded the status of official language by the revised National Policy on Education but unfortunately, its use has not extended beyond trans-border communication and post - primary and university education.

POLICY AND PRACTICE

In this section, we examine the effectiveness of the Nigerian language policy in relation to the indigenous minority languages of Cross River State. Efik is the only Cross River State language that is taught and learnt in schools in the areas it is spoken as a mother tongue. No other language in the State has acquired this status. This is working against the provision of the language component of the National Policy on Education which states that government will ensure that the medium of instruction will principally be the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community. In brief, policy and reality do not match. Children in these areas still have greater exposure to early literacy in English, hence, there is strong social pressure to learn this foreign language and culture at the expense of the indigenous languages.

As a consequence, most of these ethn olinguistic groups in Cross River State shift from their L1 to English, and by extension, Nigerian Pidgin, which offers more power and opportunities. The indigenous speaking population is steadily reduced and there is no prospect of the use of their languages. Minority children are denied their right to their languages as media of instruction in schools. In this regard, we lend credence to Clement's (2006) assertion that "...what keeps a language alive is its social function, the only people who can stop a language from shrinking or dying are the speakers of that language". A further imposition of a major Nigerian language on speakers of Cross River State minority languages in post-primary school is also a policy that cannot be implemented because of the lack of resources for the training of teachers and the production of materials to facilitate teaching and learning of these languages (Gonzalez, 2003, p. 34).

Emenanjo (2005) argues that the pronouncements on the three major languages are vague and effeminate. The expression "government considers it to be of interest to national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn" does not suggest that the choice of language is optional and left to the child to choose or not to choose. He further contends that if learning a major national language is a national responsibility then, its learning cannot be optional. It has to be compulsory.

On the plight of the minority languages in Cross River State, we argue that the three so-called major national languages cannot be the media of preserving and promoting the cultures of the minor indigenous languages. Although the policy has provided for early literacy in the

indigenous languages, it is not pedagogically feasible until goals of corpus planning are met in these languages. This is why English continues to be foisted on the speakers of the indigenous Cross River State languages, which hinders their ability to think critically in the mother tongue or at least in the national language which is structurally similar to the mother tongue. This partially explains the problem of language and identity in Nigeria today. Wardhaugh (1986, p. 347) asserts that when speakers of a minority language are suddenly denied the use of that language in educating their children their language lose status.

The introduction of French and Arabic as languages of international discourse and co-operation by the policy is a way of subjugating the indigenous minority language speakers in Cross River State. Benghida (2006, p. 44) argues that:

Language encapsulates specific values and belief of a group and acts as a significant instrument for shaping and describing reality by influencing people's perceptions and interpretations of that reality. After all, language helps determine our view of ourselves, our surroundings, relationships and ideologies. Simply, it helps determine who we are.

In this regard, how does the study of French help to propagate the value system, perceptions and worldviews of the minority language speakers in Cross River State. Teaching and Learning French would imply imbibing a new culture, which undoubtedly may not have any comparable merits. The important point is that the present language policy in Nigeria does not match reality nor conform to the expressed attitude of the people concerned.

SOME CASE STUDIES

In this section, we examine language planning and policies in multilingual countries as they affect education in minority languages and try to situate Cross River State minority languages, make projections on the way forward.

In Algeria, language policy is subsumed in one word. Arabisation, a policy of monolingualism favouring Arabic as the official language and largely without measure to protect and develop the other existing languages (Benghida, 2006, p. 37). Languages like Tamazight, which is a minority language is recently being elaborated, standardized and codified. It has no more than a formal recognition in the country's constitution and no position/action has been undertaken for its status planning, though in 2002, it was recognised as a national language. Morsly (1984, 1988) also records that French has a prominent position in the Algerian society as it competes with Arabic in a number of domains, such as commerce and finance, science and technology. French maintains a privileged position in education especially in the private sector and it is considered as a foreign language by the country's constitution.

Benghida (2006, p. 38) also maintains that the Algerian

language policy is intended to make Algerians learn that national language and, in time, make all vernaculars disappear. Though Tamazight has been recognised as a national language, the recognition is not followed by a corpus nor status planning. It does not have any place in the educational domain. Arabic, English and French are the only languages which are promoted in education. The Arabisation in education policy makes Arabic a compulsory subject or medium of instruction at all levels of education while English and French are in competition.

The situation in Zimbabwe is no less encouraging. According to Viriri (2009), English continues to dominate the social, economic and political life of the country. It is also the language of instruction in the entire education system, while African languages continue to be downgraded in schools and vernacularized outside the wider community (Chimhundu, 1983, p. 57). He further opines that to worsen the whole situation, English was used in teaching African languages at post-primary and tertiary levels. There are many indigenous language in Zimbabwe such as Shona, Ndebele, Tswana, Pfumbi, Sotho, Lozi, Lenba, Changana and Nyanja among others but non was considered adequate for administrative or educational purposes.

In Burkina Faso, French is the only official language but up to 60-70 African languages are spoken among the 10 million population of people (Gadeli, 1999). Fulfulde and Jula have been given official recognition as national languages and were strongly used in government, education and administration though he regretted that the action of the revolutionary government did not succeed on a larger scale since the entire country is modelled towards French - oriented educational system.

In Tanzania, a country with about 33 million people, Gadeli (1999) reported that it operates a three-level model in its language policy. Local Tanzanian languages are spoken in the villages, Kiswahili is recognised as the African lingua franca and is used for national communication while English is used for international discourse and contacts. The local languages are neglected in the area of education. None is either a medium of instruction in school or a school subject and the speakers of these languages learn the African lingua franca Kiswahili and English in school. Gadeli (1999) further maintains that there is probably no African country which has succeeded so well in promoting an African Lingua Franca like Tanzania but at the expense of its over 120 indigenous languages which are at various degrees of endangerment.

However, in Ghana, the picture is equally gloomy. Indigenous languages are not used as media of instruction for early literacy. Owu-Ewie (2006) reports that:

In May 2002, Ghana promulgated a law, which mandates the use of English language as the medium of instruction from primary one (grade one) to replace the use of a Ghanaian language as the medium of instruction for the

first three years of schooling, and English as the medium of instruction from primary four (grade four) (p. 76).

However, at the post-primary level, most of the indigenous languages in the country are made to flourish and compete with each other in the domains of education, mass media, legislation and so on. English is the official language and the language of administration and legislation. At the level of West African School Certificate Examinations, ten indigenous languages; Ewe, Ga, Gonja, Akan (Twi and Fante), Nzema, Kasem, Dagbani, Ga-Adamgbe, Gurune and Dagaare have been recognised and examined. These languages are also encouraged to be taught and learnt as undergraduate courses in the countries leading Universities. Well-articulated corpus planning initiatives have been put in place such as the design of orthographies, production of literacy materials, dictionaries, grammar books, pedagogic books and the training of teachers, particularly at the University of Education, Winneba, to meet the manpower needs of teaching indigenous Ghanaian languages at all levels of education. In fact, Ghana is one of the few countries that has deliberate language-education planning where competencies are meant to be achieved in the indigenous languages.

THE WAY FORWARD

Viriri (2003) maintains that each language reflects a unique view of the world, pattern of thought and culture. Every language represents a special way of viewing human experience and the world itself. Where minority languages are overwhelmed by 'big' languages, it is only through well-articulated language policy and planning that can arrest the imminent crisis of extinction of the minority languages. These languages should particularly be used in education as a way of recognizing their potentials. In this way, they will provide opportunities for students to develop both the skills and value systems needed for socialization (Emenanjo, 1985).

Mensah & Offiong (2004) uphold that the training of the mind in the understanding of the world around are best done and realised in the languages in which the students are more familiar. Hence, government saw it fit to prescribe that 'the medium of instruction of the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and at a later stage, English' (NPE, 2008).

This paper joins the agitation for the Nigerian government to fashion out a realistic language policy that will safeguard its numerous indigenous language as vehicle for learning, self-reliance and cultural nationalism, and adequate strategies should be put in place for the implementation of these policies. Some of these policies, according to Emenanjo (2005) include:

A qualitative and quantitative increase in the number of L1 and L2 teachers for Nigerian languages and ESL.

A qualitative and quantitative increase in texts of all

descriptions available in Nigerian languages. Science and mathematics books should be available for primary education in the major as well as the minority languages.

General awareness about the role of indigenous languages in initial literacy, mass literacy/mobilization and adult literacy.

More proficient numeracy and literacy in language use in Nigeria.

Priority position given to the recruitment of language inspectors of education.

Recognition of the need to have specialists language teachers and educators.

This paper also calls on the Nigerian government to rise above the usual rhetorics associated with the politics of language in the country by ensuring that indigenous Nigerian languages are a part of the curricula of Colleges of Education in the country to cater for the human resource needs of teaching these languages as media of early literacy.

At the state level, the Cross River State government, through the Ministry of education should enact some intervention policies for the corpus development of its numerous indigenous languages. The state government should sponsor the design of the orthographies of these indigenous languages and ensure the development of primers and metalanguages in order to expand the domain of usage of these languages. Regular workshops and seminars should be organised to raise awareness about the endangered status of these languages. Conscious efforts should be initiated towards the maintenance or revival of these languages. Speakers of minority languages should be encouraged to use their language in all its ramifications; at home, in education, social, cultural and economic life. These languages should also be given a pride of place in the mass media for public mobilization and sensitization on government programmes and policies. This is because the best way to preserve any language is to speak it.

Sociocultural organizations can also be of help in linguistic activism in respect of the minority indigenous languages. They can monitor linguistic policies and seek to lobby and influence the appropriate authorities where necessary. They should also aim at promoting literacy and initiate language maintenance programmes to increase the morale of the users of these languages

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the role of minority languages in education in Cross River State, South-eastern Nigeria, in the light of the country's language policy and planning. It argued that the continued neglect of the indigenous languages in the educational domain translates to the denial of linguistic rights of children who speak these languages as their mother tongue. It also creates a gulf between the home and school, given the intersection of these languages with English, which

is the primary medium of instruction for these children. The paper examined the linguistic policy in Nigeria, which, though favours multilingualism as a practice, does not encourage the competition of indigenous languages with the foreign languages. Implementation of the policy is also a snag on the part of the Federal government. The paper compared the scenario in other countries and concludes that it is a recurring problem, especially in African countries. The paper reiterates the agitation for the recognition of Nigerian's indigenous languages as a major tool for literacy, which is psychologically, sociologically and educationally beneficial to the learner (UNESCO). There should be conscious attempts to engage these languages in corpus planning, to train and motivate teachers, and to provide training materials that would facilitate the teaching and learning of the indigenous languages.

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