

NIGERIA AND LANGUAGE CHANGE: A STUDY IN HISTORICAL PATTERNS

Chris Whitney

Department of Linguistics
University of Victoria

It is not easy for an outsider to get a sense of proportion on social and political issues in Nigeria. The African inherits a temperament, environment and history that is not immediately comprehensible to a nordic visitor. Experience teaches both caution and enthusiasm. To live in Nigeria without forming opinions about language issues would be unthinkable; problems of communication and inter-ethnic tension are a part of daily business for native and foreigner alike.

The questions an outsider might ask are many and broad. How do language groups come into conflict? What steps are taken to try to deal with these conflicts? How often are policies to deal with linguistic diversity effective and how often destructive? Can we predict some of the conflicts that occur? Can enlightened language policies ease the ethnic tensions that apparently all multi-lingual societies face? These are universal questions. Are there universal answers?

I have lived in Nigeria on two separate occasions, from 1983-85 and in 1989. On the first occasion I taught English in a secondary school and on the second I taught a variety of subjects to apprentice cabinet-makers in a furniture-making shop. My views are informed, then, by my own experience as an observer of Nigerian life, a teacher of young Nigerians, and as, at times, a member of a linguistic minority in conflict with the community around me. The spacing of my two periods of residence has allowed me to get a feeling for rate of change. Nigerian society is quite unstable and is currently going through a period of economic hardship. There are social forces at play that may have dated the earlier work of Nigerian linguists and language planners. Not the least of the new factors is a decline in the standard of and access to education. English, the official language, is, however, virtually no one's first language and depends for its vitality on a vigorous and widely accessible education system. As in other African countries, the once seemingly unassailable colonial languages may not in time be so difficult to dislodge, if and when African societies stabilize into a way of life based on their own priorities and realities.

My interest, then, is in language attitudes, language change and implications for language policy in the West African country of Nigeria. Although Nigeria has been identified as the most ethnically and linguistically (equivalent terms in Nigeria) diverse in Africa, and its problems of administration and nation-building the most difficult, its predicament is by no means uncharacteristic of many countries, both in Africa and elsewhere, and both today and in past.

I will first summarize the typology of language decline presented in Kahane and Kahane (1979), then examine some evidence for language change in other African countries (Ivory Coast, Zaire, Ghana and Tanzania). Following that I will speculate on possible futures of the official and national languages of Nigeria. I will argue that language change observable in African states conforms to historic patterns and natural laws which operate with little regard for the best intending language plans.

To champion the observed lessons of history is to challenge what appears to be a widespread assumption about the uniqueness of the age in which we are living. Communication technologies seem to make it improbable that significant cultures can survive in isolation, and seem to have made the spread of world languages both desirable and inevitable. The present status of English as an international language may be without precedent, but clearly it represents a phenomenon often repeated throughout history, and its uniqueness at present is purely a matter of degree. Medieval Latin served an analogous useful function, as did Classical Latin, Classical Greek and French at their respective periods of ascendancy. Civilizations go through cycles of rise and decline; the ebb and flow of history embraces periods of internationalism and universal states, and of nationalism and the drive for individual identity. There is no evidence that these poles of civilization have ceased to effect a dynamism of change.

Kahane and Kahane conclude their examination of the decline of Western prestige languages as seen through six selected case histories with the following summary:

A frequent pattern of sequences, then, seems to unfold: a diglossic system, H vs L, reflecting a class society, is strangled by L, which expands under popular pressures. Elitist H declines, but it does not disappear completely; rather it compromises with L through a largely lexical fusion, thereby creating a more flexible instrument for a more open society. The standard which is born is the language of the educated middle strata. (196)

In the light of this, then, the questions to examine are:

1. Are the old colonial languages, in widespread use now as official languages and languages of education in African countries, likely to survive?
2. What is happening to the "national" languages (Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba in Nigeria)?
3. Are there other languages emerging that are establishing themselves, policies notwithstanding, as primary communication vehicles (lingua francas)?

Another way to ask these questions is to ask if the historical typology outlined above holds, or if, in this unique period in history, the forces at play will produce new patterns of language change?

In Ghana (Saah, 1986) language diversity is of a nature such that no indigenous languages have been elevated to official or national language status. A former British colony, Ghana retains English as its official and educational language. Its position seems undisputed in these domains, and it might be noted that amongst English speaking West African, Ghanaians have a reputation for having a high level of English competence.

Standard Ghanaian English has become Africanized not so much lexically or structurally, as through its assimilation of cultural norms for local language groups. Thus, the use of euphemism in English by native speakers of Akan reflects the practice of the speakers' first language. A diglossic situation exists between local languages and English.

It is a sad state of affairs that due to the high premium placed on English in Ghanaian schools, most literates feel much more comfortable writing in English to their

friends and relations though they usually communicate verbally in their own language. (Saah:371)

There also exists a diglossic relationship between varieties of English, with standard and pidgin varieties opposed. Though the language of "totally illiterate speakers", pidgin "has become so fashionable to use... that even some high school and university students use it a lot in casual conversation" (372). Pidgin has acquired a kind of prestige as a language of solidarity and identity. Saah (p.375) writes of working as an enumerator in the 1970 population census, when he was unable to gain the confidence of one old man (albeit, a Liberian living in Ghana) until he switched from standard "book" English to pidgin.

Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire) is a former French colony that, at least at a glance, seems to have retained close ties to its old colonial masters (this is an impression gathered during a visit in January, 1990). It exhibits the characteristic language diversity of its neighbours, with four major language groups subdued under French as the official language and language of education. The position of standard French, however, is not secure:

In the face of all kinds of economic difficulties, of record numbers of school dropouts and (intellectual) unemployment, mastery of the official language is no longer a guarantee of socioeconomic integration. In fact, the use of Standard French when addressing an uneducated or less educated person may sometimes be perceived as an offense. (Djite, 1987:220)

Competing with Standard French as *lingua francas* are Dyula (a dialect of Mandingo) and Popular French (a pidgin). While Popular French, though relatively widespread, remains stigmatized as a language of illiterates, Dyula is more widely accepted.

The frequent use of Dyula by the elite and the international community for functions other than those of government and administration has increased the pervasiveness of the language and contributed to making it more attractive to all... the language is no longer regarded as the exclusive medium of communication of the uneducated... [it has] become a marker of the desire to identify with the natives... this variety is simplified and its lexicon is full of borrowings from other local languages and from French. (219)

Though these languages appear to be on the ascent,

Populations are suspicious... a new language policy... might rob them of the only chance...to achieve a higher socioeconomic status, which they still associate with the mastery of Standard French. (222)

Zaire rivals the linguistic complexity of Nigeria, with 300 local languages, four national languages (Ciluba, Kikongo, Kiswahili and Lingala) and French as "the language of public administration and international relations and the medium of instruction" (Rubango, 1988:267).

With only four per cent of the population speaking this language of power, and with changing times, French here is also in trouble:

Toutefois, depuis l'indépendance, le chômage et le paupérisation des jeunes élites s'accroissent... se forme graduellement une nouvelle aristocratie financière généralement non ou insuffisamment instruite. D'où le slogan populaire qu'on rencontre dans plusieurs langues nationales: "le français, est-ce l'argent?" D'où également la croyance corollaire que... le français constitue une des voies les plus sûres de la clochardisation, de la prolétarianisation. (256)

French taught in the school systems is accused of undergoing all the deviations from the standard characteristic of the pidginization process. Hostility or indifference to French, poor habits of French use at home and school, incompetent teachers, insufficient instruction manuals are all cited as reasons for the failure of the official language.

The government maintains French as the official language, however, because it fears "une nouvelle tempête de passions et de violences dans un pays où la plaie des troubles politiques et sociaux n'est pas complètement encore fermée" (261). It is recognized that another danger exists "à épouser une manière de national-chauvinisme stérile et d'ethno-centrisme asphyxiant" which would result in the loss of

Certaines valeurs étrangères positives, qu'elles émanent d'Occident ou d'ailleurs, qu'elles soient d'ordre matériel, technologique ou spirituel, culturel. (264)

Increasingly, however, English is being seen as this vehicle to gain access to the positive influence of the outside world, and the educated elite seem to be turning more and more to it. English cannot take the place of an internal lingua franca, however. It is in the national languages that French here faces its competition, "particulièrement celles qui, parmi les *linguae francae*, présentent une vocation continentale et mondiale" (263).

Tanzania differs from other countries discussed and shares in common with northern Nigeria a history in which colonial administrations (German and British) used an already established trade language, Swahili in this case, as the language of administration. The happy consequence of this was a post-independence language policy that is "one of the most successful instances of language institution in the world" (Fasold, 1984:266). English survives for a number of "high" functions, but Swahili, a language both indigenous and neutral (not favouring any particular ethnic group), remains the national and official language.

Tanzania's situation is fortunate and, apparently, unique, for even at the time of independence, use of Swahili was widespread. Kenya, by contrast, has also attempted to establish Swahili, but against a background of very limited use, and it has found itself much more dependent on English for its official and inter-ethnic communication needs.

Tanzania, then, is an anomaly in the linguistic fabric of modern Africa, having, in some sense at least, attained the more open society the Kahanes saw as the driving force behind language change in diglossic language communities.

Wardhaugh (1986) identifies the problem:

When European imperialism was finally effectively removed from Asia and Africa... there was no... redrawing of political boundaries. The previous colonies, often

peculiar amalgams of language and ethnic groups, since conquest rather than language or ethnicity had accounted for their origins, became independent whole nations except in a few cases, such as Pakistan, Burma and Sri Lanka, when there was successful separation in contrast to Biafra's unsuccessful attempt to secede from Nigeria and Katanga's from Zaire. Many of the resultant nations have no common ethnicity, and strong internal linguistic and ethnic rivalries, making national planning and consensus difficult to achieve at best...

One important consequence is that the new states... are often multilingual but, as a result of their histories, have elites who speak a European language such as English or French. This language not only serves many as an internal working language but is also regarded as the language of mobility. It is both the language that transcends local loyalties and the one that opens up access to the world outside the nation.

He goes on to observe:

It is unlikely that in these circumstances such "outside" languages will disappear; rather it is likely that they will continue to be used and that positions of leadership will continue to go only to those who have access to them, *unless present conditions change* [my emphasis] (345).

In the African countries examined there is widespread evidence of the emergence of popular lingua francas, unofficial challengers in many cases to the official languages as established by stated government policy. In Ghana the popular lingua franca is pidgin English which is gaining acceptance amongst well-educated members of the society, though it does not at this time threaten to supplant English. In Ivory Coast, however, standard French seems confined to a particular social stratum, its former prestige undermined by changing economic realities. Rising is the popular language Dyula, enriched with French lexical items, acceptable across social class and ethnic boundaries, though not yet developed enough to take over the official duties of standard French. In Zaire standard French is being challenged as an international language by English, and as a lingua franca by the national languages, though official functions cannot be surrendered at this time. Similarly, in Central African Republic the official language is French, but a national language in widespread use, Sango, is a combination of a simplified local language and French lexical material (Samarin, 1986). Tanzania is an exception to the pattern apparent here due to more favourable historical circumstances.

Nigerian linguists devote much thought to national language issues. Most are frankly uncomfortable with the role English has assumed in Nigerian life; it is a sort of inescapable reminder of a colonial past few feel proud of, or completely reconciled to. It is felt that, at least so far, English has not "forged the national unity or integration envisaged by the early planners" (Awonusi, 1985:25). Discussion of language issues follows a well-worn course: first, possible indigenous alternatives to English are examined, then rejected because of probable interethnic conflict; exogenous African languages are considered, such as Swahili, and are then rejected because of difficulties encountered where this strategy has been tried (Kenya and Uganda). A less common alternative has emerged in Nigeria where a planned language (Guosa; see Igbnewka, 1987) has been developed. There is little historical precedent for the success of planned (artificial) languages due to a lack of "historicity" and "vitality" (see discussion of Stewart's formula in Fasold, 1984:64-67). Most discussions conclude as in Awonusi (29): "therefore, loved or hated, the English language is bound to remain Nigeria's lingua franca for the foreseeable future."

The national language most frequently singled out as a possible candidate to replace English is Hausa. It has a history as a trade language across the northern regions of several modern West African states, it numbers more speakers than even Swahili in East Africa and it has been developed as a language of administration. Awonusi conducted a study early in the period of the second civilian regime (1980) which indicated that there was considerable openness amongst the elected members of the government to the Hausa language as a replacement for English. This support seemed to cross the old ethnic divisions. Fakuade (1989) traces the spread of Hausa through a number of non-Hausa speaking areas in some of the northern states of Nigeria.

Awonusi's study, however, was made during a period of great optimism that the subsequent performance of the civilian regime could not sustain. Hausa has never, professed openness of legislators notwithstanding, made significant inroads in the Yoruba and Ibo speaking parts of Nigeria, though each of those languages seems to be growing in importance relative to its minor language neighbours. Significantly, neither Awonusi nor Fakuade saw Hausa establishing itself nationwide. It would seem that if Nigeria had in fact split into the three countries it nearly did in the 1960's (it was the north that first attempted secession; the east, Biafra, followed), language problems would be of considerably more manageable proportions. This reasoning still has considerable currency, though perhaps is losing its force in the younger generation.

Recognizing the magnitude of the problem, the government of Nigeria, in 1977, presented a three language policy:

The Government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his mother-tongue. In this connection, the Government considers the three main languages to be Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. (Olagoke, 1982:200)

This policy was developed in a time of great expansion of the education system. It was not implemented then. Today that system is very much in decay; school enrollment has dropped with the re-introduction of school fees, funding is not available to staff schools adequately, texts and supplies are few. The three-language policy (that is, native, English and one other major language) seems a remote dream. It is simply too much trouble in a climate where basic survival cannot be assured.

With 40% of Nigerians bilingual in English, and its exclusive use for the functions of the present federal military government; with the major languages not able to gain acceptability beyond traditional or present geographic domains, it might seem that English is too firmly established and too important to lose. Perceiving this to be the case, some writers have sought to dignify it through a concept of Nigerian Standard English. Akere (1978) examines some "wider semantic features" associated with kinship terms. His attempt to identify with a rigorously "correct" English that acquires its African identity in this manner, while dismissing the syntactic and phonological changes of popular usage as "mistakes and solecisms", suggests an understandable but unnecessary insecurity. The educated elite may often have felt a need to measure themselves by international standards. This need, however, undoubtedly serves as a counter-force to the realization and articulation of a coherent African identity. The rise of a truly representative popular standard will reflect growing confidence in the identity it expresses. The emergence of that confidence should reflect an evolving maturity of the new national societies.

The language that seems most likely to become that popular standard is pidgin.

Pidgin English has almost taken over the role of lingua franca in nonformal domains. Thus, it has become the most popular medium of intergroup communication in various heterogeneous communities throughout the country... it is now developing into a mother tongue and is spreading both horizontally across the entire country and vertically across various categories of speakers, literate and illiterate, male and female, old and young. (Akinaso, 1989:136)

Nigerian Pidgin is a combination of southern Nigerian languages and English (see also Faraclas, 1989). It is used by some newspapers, by broadcast media, as a literary vehicle and as the language of the marketplace wherever different ethnic groups meet. It is the language of communication used by the police and the army. It is growing in acceptance amongst educated speakers (as in Ghana).

With economic hard times, the decline of the education system and the shrinking of the professional civil service, a new class of elites can be expected to emerge, as in Zaire, who show financial and business acuity, but, being generally less educated, will speak the language of the marketplace. Many of the best educated in the Nigeria of the 1990's are finding that the ivory tower can no longer provide the middle class lifestyles that they had grown accustomed to. They too are finding new peers in the world of entrepreneurs and the exchange of goods and services.

Perhaps also, as literacy fails to bring the rewards it once seemed to promise, those more fit to survive may prove to be those illiterate farmers and market women once ridiculed by their better educated children. As the young people come to recognize a greater value in the skills of these people, the prestige they acquire is likely to attract identification through the use of their language variety. Although it is speculative to generalize from a few personal experiences, I have noticed young people using pidgin, taking the trouble to learn it when a few years ago they might have shown contempt.

Language change is inevitable. History provides many examples of this. Today, in Nigeria, as in many other African countries, language change shows a close adherence to historical patterns. The typology presented earlier seems to be strongly representative of the process in evidence. Nigeria, like other African countries discussed, has a functioning diglossic system. Standard English, the language of an educated elite, serves as the high language, H. Pidgin English, the most widespread popular lingua franca, has traditionally been used by the uneducated. Popular pressures, the product of changing economic fortunes and a maturing identity, are in fact spreading this language and reducing the domain of standard English. Pidgin is already a compromise language between certain local languages and English. Because of its predominantly English lexical content, it should readily be able to assimilate new lexical material for ever-expanding functions. Though pidgin is not yet the language of the educated middle strata, it is rapidly becoming acceptable to them.

It would be incautious to claim that Nigerian Pidgin will in fact one day become the official language of the country. The status of English as an international language is currently undisputed and it is unlikely that it will be replaced in certain critical domains in the near future. But this does not mean that the status quo will survive. The processes that brought about the decline of other prestige languages are active in many African countries. We can expect significant language changes.

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