

THE IMPACT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE DOMINANCE ON YORUBA LANGUAGE USE AMONG SELECTED YOUTH IN LAGOS STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Language endangerment, which can lead to linguicide (language death) in some cases, is an important concept in linguistics. The dominance of the English language over other local languages can be a threat to the growth of some of these languages. This study investigates how the English language in Lagos State dominates the local language, Yoruba, in Nigeria. The method adopted for the study is a mixed method. The basis for the analysis was through the investigation of the school subjects and the outcomes of the interviews conducted with some filmmakers in Lagos State. We collected data from the sources so as to demonstrate the influence of the dominant language on the local language (Yoruba) through the Language Imperialism Theory. Our results showed that most schools in Lagos do not adhere to the language policy of the government on the use of the local languages, and most of the movies that are supposed to be acted in the Yoruba language are dominated by the English Language. The implications of this are that the Yoruba language has been marginalised. This study contributes to the policy of the government in ensuring that the local languages do not become extinct.

Keywords: Endangerment, Linguicide, Language Policy, Code-Mixing, Code-Switching, Bilingualism and Multilingualism.

Introduction

An important question that demands attention is, “How has the English language influenced the local languages? Is it a positive or a negative influence? The English language, as the official language in Nigeria according to the country's language policy, has dominated the local languages to such an extent that many users of local languages feel inferior and uneducated because they lack a good command of the English language. Does that imply that the regional languages in Nigeria are endangered?

The English language has achieved a lot of functions in Nigeria. It is the status marker, language of unity, language of international relations, language of business, language of law and language of instruction in schools, Eyisi (2025). This paper aims to examine the implications and the implementations of the language policies in Nigeria and investigate how the dominance of the English language has affected some educated Nigerians in the loss of their native languages. By examining language policy and planning, language death and endangerment, we will demonstrate the impact of English on the growth or unpopularity of the local languages. This study contributes to our understanding of the endangerment of the local languages and has implications for other researchers in language studies.

Literature Review

Language Planning and Language Policy

Language planning and language policy share some relationships. The two concepts determine the position and the dominance of the official language and the local language in a country. Brown and Miller (2013) describe language planning as

the formal policy that is used to determine the language that is favoured over other languages for the purpose of official use, education and leisure.

Matthew (2007) further explains that language planning is usually a deliberate attempt by the government to give preference to one language over other languages in a particular country. With this, it is obvious that the proclamation of a language as being more promoted and acceptable in a country is in the hands of the government of that country. Language planning occurs when politicians and linguists intervene in the decision of how language should be used. Language planning has been criticised as being a favour only to the elite. This criticism was stated by the Marxist, post-structural and socio-linguists (Ferguson, 2006).

Language is important because it is used to create social interaction among people. People cannot establish any relationship without a language. The problem here is to have a single language for people of different cultural backgrounds in the same society. Bamgbose (1994) condemns the idea of one language, stating that it cannot unify the people, especially in a large population of different ethnic groups. Liddicoat (2007) identifies literary planning as the language planning that is concerned with education. It is used to determine the status of the languages used in a community and foreign languages. Having examined language planning, it is important to explain the second concept, which is language policy. Wang and Yang (2017) see language policy as a branch of sociolinguistics that has evolved recently. The growth of the discipline has been through their publications for the past twenty years. The major goal of language policy has been identified as improvement in communication. It is the choice of language made at different levels of interaction in life.

Wright (2004) traces the origin of language policy to the Second World War, and it became a university subject as a result of the creation of new nations. The new nations need a language to interact and establish some relationships. Language is also needed to create the identity of individuals in a society. The major challenge, as stated by Bamgbose and restated by Wright, is the problem of one language. Bussmann (2006) further explains that language policy is a political measure which is used to place the regional languages in multilingual states. It is used to determine the status of regional languages and foreign languages. Spolsky (2004) is ambivalent about the protection of the regional languages from the dominance of foreign languages. The author explains how some countries adopt the use of the regional language in their schools and media houses. To them, the best way to protect the regional languages is to make them the language of instruction in schools and the language of the media. Examples are the Turkish parliament, which recommends the Kurdish language in broadcasting and education. Cyrillic was recommended by the Yugoslav parliament. The same happened in Tanzania after using English for three decades. The author also mentioned some countries where English has been adopted, like Malaysia. Any wrong decision emanating from language planning and language policy can lead to language endangerment, which eventually leads to Linguicide or language death.

Language Endangerment and Language Death

Language endangerment is a serious issue in the study of language. It is a situation where a language is threatened. Bradley and Bradley (2013) argue that the endangerment and the disappearance of many languages have been of less concern to many linguists, and the field of linguistics has also not been investigating this area of research for a long time. According to these authors, the rate of language endangerment is quite alarming to the extent that the extinction of many languages is predicted in the 21st century. Some scholars estimate that up to 90% of the world's languages.

Piirainen and Sherris (2015) explain that language endangerment occurs when there is a decline in the number of speakers of the language and there is also a decrease in the environments in which the language is used.

By paying special attention to our situation in Nigeria, the regional languages do not have the same status as the English language.

Ndimele (2015) observes that endangerment is happening to most languages in Nigeria. The threat is not limited to the uncommon ones among the languages, but the threat is extended to the prominent ones, which are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The prominent ones cannot presently compete with the foreign languages, especially in terms of acceptance, number of users, acceptability and international intelligibility.

Crystal (2000) describes the major causes of language endangerment as natural catastrophe, war and genocide, avert repression, cultural, political and economic dominance. The author further explains that most languages are just on record, but do not have speakers anymore. He concludes that most of the languages only exist as documented information, but do not have existing speakers in the real world. A language is endangered when the number of users declines.

In an attempt to explain the fear of losing many languages to dominance, Austin and Sallabank (2011) think the estimated number of languages globally is about 7,000. There is no doubt that the children of this generation do not acquire 50% of the estimated number. The implication of this is that many of the languages that are not learnt will be endangered and may later go into extinction. Having explained the meaning of endangered languages, it is necessary to describe the death of a language, which is the final stage of endangerment. Schmidt and Richards (2010) give another term, language decline, to describe language death as a situation where the users of a language give preference to another language and abandon their language. It is also a situation where the children in that community stop learning the language. Whenever either of the situations or both of them happen, the language dies.

In another view, Crystal (2008) thinks that language deaths also imply language loss or obsolescence because it occurs when the people of a community have no ability to use their language anymore. The author identifies two situations of the loss of a language. It can be a gradual loss, which he refers to as attrition, it can also be a sudden loss. Matthews (2007) supports the view of Schmidt and Richards by explaining that a language dies when it disappears. This disappearance is due to the abandonment of the languages by the users.

The Status of The English Language in Nigeria

There are different varieties of the English language in Nigeria. The language is the official language of interactional relations, business and law. It is also the language of instruction in schools. In 1958, Brosnahan used the parameter of education to classify the English users in Nigeria. The first level represents those without any formal education who speak pidgin. The second level represents those with a primary school education. The third level represents English spoken by those with secondary education, often marked by the avoidance of pidgin. The fourth level represents the English spoken by graduates who are close to the standard English Brosnahan (1958). The assumptions of Brosnahan were improved by Banjo in 1971. Banjo states that social interaction and exposure of people can determine their level of English usage. Although Bayo (1971) does not state demographic factors like age, sex and level of education. In our current situation in the country, age cannot be used to determine the level of competence in the use of the language, as well as the level of education. Some Nursery and Primary school pupils of this generation speak better than some graduates.

This is possible because in the era of digital communication, children are exposed to more activities that can enhance their linguistic performance. The language experience of some of the children today is that some of them are only exposed to the English language and do not understand their regional languages. They may have insufficient vocabulary, but the level of accuracy in their sentence construction is high. Many users of the language today possess linguistic performance and little or no linguistic competence. Their competence in the use of English is not determined by their level of training, and as a result, they cannot account for the reasons for using certain expressions in a particular way. They must have earned the skill through television programmes, interaction with people, social media and imitations. Speakers like this cannot confidently identify the different varieties of the English language, and they also lack some level of inconsistencies in their use of the language.

Bilingualism and Multilingualism

It is important to examine bilingualism and multilingualism as these are the concepts that make it possible for two or more languages to coexist in an environment. The ability to have a good command and understanding of two languages is bilingualism, while an individual who possesses this quality is known as a bilingual (Graciua, 2009). Perain et al (2003) explain that the brain expands and becomes more effective in the process of learning languages because there will be some degree of comparisons and proficiency.

Bialystok et al (2008) support the assertion by stating that bilinguals possess more cognitive qualities than monolinguals because they expose their brain to the acquisition and learning of the linguistic features of more than one language. Garrafa et al (2015) demonstrate the advantages of being in possession and command of two languages through the speakers of some local languages. Bilingualism encourages cognitive competence in language use. However, the availability of more than one language in a community and the capacity of an individual to use more than one language are aspects of multilingualism. Cenoz (2013) perceives multilingualism as a field of study because it is interdisciplinary. It can be used to focus more on language acquisition and language processing.

Code Mixing and Code Switching

One of the features of bilingualism and multilingualism is the overlap of two or more languages in the speech of a bilingual or a multilingual. Code mixing and code switching are the terms used in linguistics to represent such a situation.

Alhazmi (2016) identifies code switching as an attempt to move from one language to another in a conversation. It is inter-sentential when the switch occurs within a language. It is intra-sentential when it is from one sentence to another. It is used to demonstrate the speaker's level of competence in the languages in use. Code switching is organised and deliberate. It is for the purpose of achieving clarity in message delivery. De Ruiter and Ziamari (2019) think that code switching and code mixing are often used interchangeably. Code mixing has been specifically defined as the transfer of the features of one language to another language during a conversation without any obvious reason. It is important to note that both code switching and code mixing can be used to achieve creativity and aesthetics in language. They are both present in a multilingual society like Lagos State, Nigeria.

Most of the speakers in this part of the world speak at least two languages. It is not impossible to have dominance of code switching and code mixing among these Lagosians in the broadcast media, some social media comments and even some lyrics that are produced in some songs by the Yoruba speakers in this part of the world.

Summary of the National Language Policy

In the Nigerian National Language policy of 2023, the Federal Government of Nigeria begins by emphasising that Nigerian languages should be preserved and protected from endangerment. In section 18, the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community must be the language of instruction from the Early Childhood Care and Development Education to the six years of primary education.

This implies that the English language must not be introduced to the students until they are in their first year of secondary.

In section 19, the government states clearly that a combination of the English language and the language of the immediate community should be adopted in disseminating information to the students from the Junior Secondary school one to three.

In the policy, the government assures the citizens of effective supervision of the teaching and learning of Nigerian languages at the Federal, State and Local Government levels.

The National Language policy on Education if properly implemented as promised by the government, is tending to resist the endangerment of the Nigerian languages from the dominance of the English language.

In sec. 33, the student shall be made to study one Nigerian language as a compulsory at the senior secondary school levels. In addition, the government encourages that students in these tertiary institutions should learn one Nigeria language at that level.

Projects, dissertations are expected to have additional abstract which is written in the language of the immediate community. The establishment of universities that teach in Nigerian languages is the last plan.

Methodology

This study used a mixed-method approach to investigate the dominance of the English language on the Yoruba language among the youth in Lagos State. A survey of some government-owned schools and private schools in Lagos State was conducted to investigate the implementation and adherence to the government policy on the preservation of the Nigerian languages and the use of the languages as the medium of instruction. Interviews were conducted with two Yoruba movie producers to investigate the causes of code mixing in their choice of words. The results were interpreted in the context of the existing literature. Of course, the limitations of the study are the availability of limited data and the restriction of the scope to a state in the country. The use of the mixed approach gave room for a comprehensive understanding of the topic. It enabled the investigation to go beyond education and extend to the use of the Nigerian language in Yoruba movies.

Theoretical Framework

Language Imperialism Theory

The major concern of this theory is that dominant languages usually have control over other languages and cultures. According to Phillipson (2009), the theory examines language spread, language shift and cultural homogenisation.

The assumptions of this theory are:

- i. The dominant language has a high level of dominance over the regional languages.
- ii. The dominant language usually absorbs the cultural values and norms of the regional languages
- iii. The dominant language exercises some supremacy over the native languages.

Data Presentation

A cross-section of primary schools in Lagos State was examined to examine the implementation of the use of the Yoruba language to teach the students. The schools selected are some private schools in the developed areas of Lagos State for the purpose of identifying the true picture of the Lagosians. The same was adopted in the selection of the public schools. Primary and secondary school levels were examined. Developed areas like Lagos Island and Lagos Mainland were used for data collection. Interviews were conducted as the instrument for data to reveal the true feelings of the school owners and the teachers. It is also through this tool that the respondents can clarify and amplify what a questionnaire that is mostly closed-ended cannot allow.

	Private School	Public School
Yoruba as the medium of instruction in primary school	No compliance	No compliance
JSS1 – JSS 3 (Combined approach)	No compliance	A little
Making it compulsory in SS1 – SS3	Few	To a large extent

1st interview: Private school owners and some selected teachers responded that an inferiority complex is the cause of the dominance of the English language

2nd interview: Some selected parents responded that the reality of Lagos State and the people's level of competence in the use of the language is the cause

Data Analysis

	Private School	Public School
Yoruba as the medium of instruction from early childhood to primary six	0%	0%
Combination of the two languages for JSS 1 - JSS 3	0%	20%
Making it compulsory in SS1 – SS3	20%	70% and above

Another interview was conducted with some Yoruba film-makers in Lagos to ascertain the reason for code-mixing or the dominant use of the English language in a Yoruba movie. Here is the summary of their response:

1st Interview: Users of the Yoruba language feel inferior, and they tend to practise code-mixing to demonstrate their competence in the use of the English language.

2nd Interview: Most educated Lagosians are not competent users of Yoruba, and if a movie is acted in only the Yoruba language without some elements of code-mixing, they may not understand the content, and this can affect the patronage of their products. The target population determines the language choice

Discussion

The dominance of the English language on has made the Yoruba language and its users inferior to the English language and its users. This has been confirmed by Phillipson (2009). It is rare to find any school that uses Yoruba as the language of instruction from the Early childhood to Primary six. The reason provided by the heads of the schools contacted is that parents of the pupils do not support the idea as they

embrace proficiency in the use of the English language from the early school days. Ndimele (2015) explains this endangerment as it happens to the major languages, such as Yoruba. The speakers of the language (Yoruba) without mixing it with the English language are few.

Piirainen and Sherris (2015) define endangerment as the representation of the decline in the number of users. As revealed in the second category of interviews with some filmmakers, this inferiority complex has compelled filmmakers to practise code-mixing in their movies to reach a wider audience. The study has some limitations in terms of data collection because Lagos State has a lot of schools in different Local Government Areas, and it is practically unachievable to account for the language situations in all the schools in the state; instead, some selected but popular schools were selected for data collection. Other future researchers can explore more schools and more causes of the decline in the use of the Yoruba language in other areas of the state or be specific in their chosen areas. The opinions here are the outcomes of the interactions with some heads of the associations formed by the private schools in Lagos State and some observations from the stakeholders.

Conclusion

This study reaffirms that the Yoruba language is endangered through the dominance of the English language in Nigeria. Yoruba language use declines in Lagos State because the schools do not implement its use as the medium of instruction from the outset. Many of the users prefer to use the English language as an interference to their Yoruba use. It is important to revive the use of the Yoruba language in Lagos State through constant use to avoid the death of the language. The need for some supervision is suggested to encourage regular use of the language in schools in Lagos State.

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