Résumé
K. Allan — Nation, tribalisme et langue nationale : le cas du Nigeria. Le Nigeria présente, même à l'échelle africaine, un cas extrême de multilinguisme. L'auteur étudie en détail les avantages et les inconvénients du choix d'une langue africaine comme langue nationale et conclut que les effets d'un tel choix ayant toutes les chances d'être négatifs, la solution la moins mauvaise est de conserver l'anglais.

Citer ce document / Cite this document :
doi : 10.3406/cea.1978.2383

Document généré le 02/06/2016
KEITH ALLAN

Nation, Tribalism and National Language: Nigeria’s Case

Dr. Samuel Johnson’s observation (1775) that ‘languages are the pedigree of nations’ is sometimes echoed by nationalists in emergent countries like Nigeria, who feel that their nation’s pedigree cannot be established until an indigenous language is chosen for the national language in place of the one inherited from the former colonial masters.¹ In this essay I shall examine this point of view and the consequences that might ensue from its effectuation in Nigeria. Very little of what I have to say is new, but it is still worth considering because the national language question is so emotionally charged that a rational approach can only hope to prevail by constant repetition of rational arguments.

Typically, it is in his mother tongue that an individual is made aware of the world about him and learns the history, culture, customs and traditions of his people. An individual’s language identifies him as a member of a particular group. Conversely, a group maintains its distinctive identity by having its own specific language or forms of language; thus the jargon or slang peculiar to many institutional, occupational, recreational, and religious groups serves to forge social unity among an often disparate group of people. That is why Islam, and until recently the Roman Catholic Church, have insisted that their respective faiths can only properly be expressed through Classical Arabic and Church Latin. In the political sphere, most nationalist movements promote and propagate the use of a native national language in order to forge unity


The words nation, national and nationalist when applied in the context of an emergent country typically mean ‘the people of a State’, ‘pertaining to the State’, and ‘a protagonist for the State’, where State is defined as a political entity which (supposedly) regulates supreme executive power within agreed geographical boundaries and whose existence is recognised by other States. As applied to Europe, however, these words often have a somewhat different meaning, and denote respectively ‘a subgroup of the people of a State’, ‘pertaining to this subgroup’, etc. The Basque nationalists or the Welsh nationalists distinguish themselves from the people of Spain and France, or Britain, by claiming to be a linguistically homogeneous group whose members share common culture, customs, and tradition, and whose membership encompasses a complete age range in both sexes, some variety in social structure and occupation, and differentials of wealth, status and power—what in Africa would be called a tribe. Predictably, when I talk about a national language for Nigeria, I mean a language for the State of Nigeria; when I talk about tribalism, I mean the same, mutatis mutandis, as the Welsh mean by ‘nationalism’.

Cahiers d’Études africaines, 71, XVIII-3, pp. 397-415.

Sadly it is just because such emergent States contain a number of speech communities, each of which feels itself to have a separate cultural heritage, that there exists no single indigenous language which is acceptable to all sections of the population as the medium for cultural expression; and so, paradoxically, any attempt to establish a common bond among the people by imposing on them an indigenous language as the national language will generate division within the country, as India’s experience shows. And the paradox can also be illustrated from a debate in the Nigerian House of Representatives on 21 November 1961 on the proposal that Hausa should be adopted as the national language of Nigeria. The reaction to this proposal by Chief Anthony Enahoro (a nationalist who fought for the independence of Nigeria) was utterly natural and widely supported. He said:

‘... as one who comes from a minority tribe, I deplore the continuing evidence in this country that people wish to impose their customs, their languages, and even their way of life upon the smaller tribes [. . .] My people have a language, and that language was handed down through a thousand years of tradition and custom. When the Benin Empire exchanged ambassadors with Portugal, many of the new Nigerian languages of today did not exist. How can they now, because the British brought us together, wish to impose their languages on us?’ (Parl. 1961-62: 3156-3157.)

It is extremely doubtful that Enahoro’s mother tongue, Edo, is older than any of the other Nigerian languages, none of which would be described as ‘new’ by a linguist; but it is entirely characteristic of language loyalty to make—in all good faith—exaggerated claims like these on behalf of one’s own speech community. Enahoro’s speech reveals the very real fear that if they are given linguistic hegemony a people will try to impose its customs and way of life upon the rest of the nation; indeed, later in the debate Enahoro actually says: ‘We have not fought the imperialist in order to establish a new imperialism in this country.’ (Ibid.: 3158.)

It is not inexorable that a people using a second language should adopt the customs and traditions of its native speakers, yet a group whose language is dominant will typically be dominant politically, and/or socially, economically, and culturally, and certainly psychologically: that is, they will tend to feel themselves dominant, and be resented as such by those who use their language but are not native speakers. Such a feeling is backed by hard realities: speakers of that language have an advantage over others in educational achievement, in government,
administration, the judiciary, and at least the higher echelons of the teaching profession. They thus have an advantage in power today, and in retaining power tomorrow. So we find that the linguistic hegemony of a speech community often correlates with its political hegemony within the country. And if the choice of a single language for the country as a whole results in the enhanced status of one of the speech communities, i.e. one tribe, the resentment of the others will be a powerful divisive force in the country; a force destructive to the very unity which a national language is ideally meant to forge.

In the light of this rather pessimistic prognosis I shall discuss the question of a national language for Nigeria, beginning with the plausibility of choosing a native one and then considering the various alternatives.

At the time of independence a number of articles appeared in the Nigerian press suggesting that an African national language should be adopted (Ajarchukwu 1960; Ola 1960; Solarin 1961), and a debate on the topic ensued in the House of Representatives on 21 November 1961. There, a motion was eventually passed ‘to introduce the teaching of Hausa, Yoruba, Ibo and other languages into institutions of learning throughout the country with a view to adopting one of them as our official language in the near future’. (Parl. 1961-62: 3145.) However, no mention was made in the final motion of the date 20 December 1981 which had been proposed in definition of the phrase ‘near future’; and so the decision has officially been postponed sine die. An amendment moving that Hausa be adopted within five years was withdrawn after considerable opposition, such as that quoted from Enahoro (Parl. 1961-62: 3149-3169). It was made clear during the debate that to chose any one Nigerian language at that moment would cause deep resentment among many of the country’s people; and that English, the existing official language, suited the needs of development in the country and at the same time acted as a unifying force. It was further pointed out that a change would wastefully dissipate resources in translation which could be better employed in developing the country in other ways.²

Periodically the demand for linguistic indigenisation is reiterated in the press. In the New Nigerian of 27 and 28 May 1971, M. S. Ajibola Jimba argued:

‘A country without a national language has nothing to be proud of as a nation. The failure of a country to adopt one of its languages as the lingua franca puts an indelible stain on that country’s dignity as an independent country. This failure is in most cases due to tribal conflicts. The speakers of the adopted language could feel that their language is superb and more important than other languages [. . . ] Many innocent Nigerians will even become victims of illusion as they may regard the adoption of a language as an imposition and ipso facto domination of the people whose language is adopted on the rest of Nigerians.’

² Some ten years later a parallel set of arguments were presented and conclusions reached in the Ghana Parliament (cf. West Africa 2817, 11.6.1971: 655).
Unfortunately although Jimba identifies the major problem, he offers no solution to it; his only comment is the idealistic: 'Once a language is adopted in Nigeria all our problems would be solved within the framework of a single nation.' This is indeed the hope, but the empirical test of such a policy elsewhere, for example in Habsburg Hungary or modern India, does not substantiate it. What does Jimba propose should be the national language? One widely spoken as a mother tongue and a lingua franca, and which is 'highly adaptable or flexible, amply capable of borrowing from other languages and very simple'. He finds that Hausa fulfils these conditions, and adds that the Hausa language is not identified with only a single tribe, unlike the other two majority languages Yoruba and Ibo. He concludes: 'since more Nigerians speak Hausa language than any other language, the indisputable choice of a national language as a lingua franca for the whole Federation falls on the Hausa language'.

Let us consider the claim, one might say the usual claim, that Hausa is best suited to be Nigeria's national language. It is a general rule that the national language of a country, if it is an indigenous language, is the one spoken most widely. Undoubtedly Hausa fulfils this condition. Although figures vary according to sources, Hausa speakers are always the largest number. According to Heine (1970: 157), 'the total number of users of Hausa in Northern Nigeria amounts to about 18.3 million'. This figure is for people who can communicate effectively in Hausa as either a first or second language, and so it is considerably larger than the estimated twelve million for the Hausa tribe; it is also at least one and a half times larger than a figure for speakers of any other Nigerian language. Even if we take this figure as correct, and it is more likely to be inflated than understated, the number of Hausa speakers constitutes only about a third of the population of Nigeria. This is considerably smaller than the proportion of Hindi speakers in India or the speakers of Magyar in Habsburg Hungary, both of which were wrecked by conflicts arising directly from the imposition or attempted imposition of these languages as the national languages of their respective countries. However, Hausa is also spoken outside the borders of Nigeria, through nearly half the Niger Republic and in the northern parts of the Benin Republic, Togo, and Ghana, as well as in pockets elsewhere in West Africa and the Congo; Heine (1970: 154) reckons that 'Hausa is spoken today by approximately 20 to 25 million people' (including those within Nigeria) which makes it the most widely spoken language in West Africa, and one used by perhaps as many people as use Swahili in East Africa (Heine 1970: 97).

One additional advantage that might be claimed for Hausa is that it

---

3. This figure predates the 1973 Census. I have not been able to get hold of Census figures for the populations of tribes or language groups. I have seen population figures for States however, and the number of people in the northern Hausa-speaking States is much higher than at the previous Census and much larger than for people in the south of Nigeria. What is said here about Hausa being more widely spoken than any other Nigerian language is confirmed and strengthened by the latest Census figures, so far as I can see.
has been a written language since before colonial times, although the script then used was ajami, based on Arabic. Lugard favoured the use of Roman script and this has become the normal orthography in which government literature, all Hausa school textbooks, and the newspaper Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo are printed.

Jimba (1971) wrote that Hausa is 'a very easy language to acquire having a clear, concise, but simple grammar'; he also said that Hausa is easier to pronounce than other Nigerian languages. The idea that Hausa is an easy language to learn is widespread, at least in northern Nigeria. During the parliamentary debate of 21 November 1961 Alhaji Baba Shehu Ibrahim, a Kanuri, claimed:

‘Even foreigners find it easier to understand the Hausa language than either Ibo or Yoruba [..]. If we introduce any other language as our national lingua franca it will be damaging and dangerous because it will affect our economy, waste the time of our teachers, waste the time of our pupils.’ (Parl. 1961-62: 3154-3155.)

A gem of linguistic bias, since it is generally accepted among linguists and psycholinguists that no language is intrinsically more difficult to learn than any other language. Yet the contrary opinion is so widely held that there may be some self-inducing truth in it: that is, people believe Hausa is easy to learn, therefore it becomes easy to learn Hausa. The notion may have arisen because the non-native speaker, with considerably less than native speaker competence in the language, finds himself readily understood by Hausa speakers and therefore believes he has mastered the language without much difficulty. I think these circumstances come about because Hausa is widely spoken as a second language and used as a lingua franca, with the consequence that Hausa speakers are used to hearing their language spoken faultily in differing accents and to interpreting it under such conditions; with languages like Ibo and Yoruba that are generally used only by native speakers, there is not the habit of listening to non-native speakers and therefore less of an ability to understand them and less readiness to accept them. Jimba (1971) notes that ‘The Yorubas and Ibos tend to laugh when a person speaks either of these falteringly. This does not happen to Hausa.’ Under such conditions the non-native speaker with considerably less than native speaker competence in Ibo and Yoruba will be given to feel he has not mastered the language, so these languages will be branded as comparatively difficult. In my experience similar attitudes to the speech of non-native speakers prevail quite generally among human beings. The receptive attitude of Hausa speakers towards non-native speakers of their language would, of course, be a great advantage if Hausa were adopted as the national language of Nigeria.

4. More than one set of spelling conventions still exist, and the spelling of Hausa in the Niger Republic is different again, being based on French spelling conventions.
None of the other Nigerian languages has the same positive advantages as Hausa. But whereas Hausa is apparently acceptable as a lingua franca over most of the northern part of Nigeria (North Eastern State, Kano State, North Central State, North Western State) it is not so welcome in the Middle Belt (Kwara State, Benue-Plateau State) and it is certainly unwelcome to the majority of the population in the south of the country (East Central State, South Eastern State, Rivers State, Lagos State, Mid-West State, Western State). Not only is Hausa spoken by only a minority of Nigeria's population concentrated in the four most northerly States in the country, it is also likely to be positively rejected by a roughly equal number of Nigerians who are not Hausa speakers. There would be the same sort of opposition if either of the other major languages were adopted as the national language of the country. I have already pointed out that the linguistic hegemony of a tribe is most likely to lead to its political hegemony and an overall domination of the nation's way of life: the adoption of any indigenous language as the national language of Nigeria would thus give rise to fears of such a domination so that national unity would be endangered. The danger will be greatest if one of the three major languages is adopted because Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo respectively dominate the former North, West and East Regions which institutionalised big tribe chauvinism in pre-civil war days. The centrifugal force of tribalism in Nigeria has always been recognised (Nigeria 1948, 11 March, Anwan: 515; Awolowo 1947: 47-48; Ballard 1966: 329; Bello 1962: 133; Kirk-Greene 1971: passim; Melson & Wolpe 1971: passim; F. A. O. Schwarz 1965: 72). After independence the long period of tribal jostling and mutual suspicion ended almost inevitably in civil war from 1967-1970. To reopen these wounds by adopting an indigenous language would be an absurd confutation of the argument that a national language should unify a nation.

The estimate for the number of languages spoken in Nigeria varies between 250 and 500; in the north they speak Chadic and Chado-Hamitic languages, and in the south Niger-Congo languages. One solution would be to choose a minor language. Prima facie this is an ideal compromise: it would, hypothetically, increase national dignity and standing among foreign nations, yet perhaps avoid the rivalry between major tribes which endangers national unity most. Unfortunately the proposal is impracticable. What criteria could be used for choosing one particular minor language for the purpose? The criterion of wide usage is a priori denied. The criterion of appropriateness of the language for the modern technological world will, most probably, be inhibited by the small number of speakers; so that a minor language would require more

5. Coleman (1958: 15) gives a figure of 248 languages spoken in the country, but John Bendor-Samuel of the Institute of Linguistics in Zaria reckons that there are about 500 (personal communication).
artificial vocabulary development than a major one. Then there is the criterion of orthographical and literary appropriateness: although many minor languages now have orthographies there is little in the way of written literature, and most of what exists is translation from foreign originals. So I conclude that there are no valid criteria for selecting a minor language. And if one were chosen arbitrarily, there is likely to be social conflict, not least in the form of resistance by major linguistic groups.

Another alternative would be to have more than one national language like, for example, Belgium, Canada or Switzerland. Two interrelated questions arise: how many languages would be permissible and on what basis would they be chosen? The alternatives seem to be either that Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo be chosen; or that each State adopts its own language and each of these is deemed national. I will consider these proposals in turn. To adopt Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo would effectively return to the country to the power block structure that existed in the days of the three Regions. Since inter-tribal rivalry and big tribe chauvinism was a major cause of disunity and conflict in the past, it would be unwise, and perhaps disastrous, to adopt this proposal. It should be noted in this connexion that in both Belgium and Canada pre-existing hostility between the two speech communities shows every sign of establishing itself more firmly and none at all of dying away: this also seems to be the norm elsewhere, e.g. Yugoslavia; with Switzerland as the inexplicable exception.

The second proposal is that each State in the Nigerian Federation adopt an official language, and all such languages be considered national languages. The ensuing Babel would then outdo the Habsburg Empire described by May (1960: 225-226):

'Linguistic confusion corresponding to the Babel in the Reichsrat prevailed in all branches of the Austrian government. Thousands of lawsuits had to be tried in two or more idioms; briefs, pleading, sentences, had to be translated and retranslated; time and money were consumed by interpreters, and the jury system was reduced to a farce by nationalistic [= tribalistic] prejudices and the inability of many jurors to understand any language other than their own. Postal and telegraph services, the collection of taxes, the conduct of business and industry, the exchange of ideas and education suffered seriously from the absence of a common language.'

If mankind can learn from history there is a dire warning here against too many national languages. In any case, even at State level the preference for one language over others may cause strife: for instance, when the governor of North Western State decreed in 1972 that all civil servants should have a qualification in Hausa, many of the Nupe people were very aggrieved and vocally opposed the decree. By way of compromise some States might adopt more than one official language: North Western

6. For example, the New Nigerian of 31 May 1973 reports: 'About 1,000 Hausa literary terms have been formulated by authorities on Hausa literature drawn from all over the six northern States.'
State, North Eastern State, Benue-Plateau State, and Rivers State all have several widely spoken languages. Thus, in South Eastern State for example, Ibibio might not be acceptable to people in the northern part of the State. And so on. Although it is likely that three or perhaps four States would adopt Hausa, the total number of prospective national languages would be impossibly high and would make a mockery of the whole notion of binding the nation together by the use of a common language.

On economic grounds, too, a single national language is preferable, as Canada has discovered. It would be prohibitively expensive to have all Federal publications issued in several languages: added to the extra cost of separate type-settings for fewer impressions in place of one setting for all, there will be a waste of valuable skilled labour in translation (Enahoro, Parl. 1961-62: 3158).

It is difficult to see that any advantage would accrue from Nigeria trying to solve the national language question by adopting an indigenous language, or alternatively a number of indigenous languages. So one is thrown back to considering the merits and demerits of the status quo.

At the present time English is de facto though not de jure the national language. Since one of the strongest arguments in favour of a single language is that it should be a unifying force, it is necessary to ask whether English can fulfil that function. Certainly I have seen no claims to the contrary and there is reason to believe that English is a unifying force; Okunowo said in the 1961 debate: ‘Indeed it [English] is the only unifying language that brings us all together.’ (Parl. 1961-62: 3178.) And O’Connell (1971: 66o) remarks that in the September 1966 Constitutional Conference in Lagos, at which the minorities first saw the chance of challenging big tribe power blocks and establishing greater equilibrium in the nation, ‘They discovered that they had an important common language—English—that they used between them in their cause.’

Because it is not the language of any indigenous tribe English is a neutral language in Nigeria, as it is in India, and as Latin was in Habsburg Hungary. Feelings that Nigerians have against English are not likely to be disruptive of national unity, on the contrary they sustain unity by projecting these particular antagonisms against a foreign people instead of against compatriots. Thus English does not suffer the main disadvantage of any indigenous language.

There are two objections to having English as a national language: it is at present the language of an educated elite who form a minority of the population; and secondly, English is a foreign language introduced by the former colonial power.

While it is true that Standard English is spoken by only a small minority of Nigeria’s population, substandard varieties down to the creole(?) Pidgin are also used by people from all strata of society. Hence the objection that English is only the language of an educated elite is not really valid.
The objection that English is not suitable because it is foreign is one that could be levelled at any Nigerian language by a majority of the country's population; Chief Enahoro made just such an objection to Hausa: 'It is true we are in the same borders, but I think that as far as languages go, Hausa is as foreign to Edo as English is to Edo.' (Parl. 1961-62: 3158.) The objection further overlooks the advantage which lies in English being the language of a foreign nation not of a Nigerian tribe, namely that it is neutral and thereby not a cause for national disunity.

The objection that English is the language of the former colonial power is only valid to those who care; to most Nigerians, English is 'a world language, it is today no longer the language of the imperialist' (Enahoro, Parl. 1961-62: 3159). It is perhaps pertinent to recall that the present national languages of France, Spain and Portugal all derive historically from the language of a foreign imperial power, to say nothing of English itself. English is an international language and probably used more widely than any other language in the world. The advantage of this is not so much for interpersonal communication, but that there are available in English all kinds of written materials covering virtually any topic; and it is a not inconsiderable advantage to an emergent country to be able to tap these resources readily: any educated Nigerian can already do so, whereas the number who can understand similar material in German, Russian, Chinese, or what have you, is very small. Presumably, if English were no longer the national language of Nigeria its availability as a vehicle for information would be as limited as German, Russian and Chinese are to the literate general public at present. And conversely, Nigerians are in an advantageous position being able to use a familiar language to make their literature and scholarship easily available to the outside world.

Supposing English to be retained as the national language of Nigeria, the question arises, what sort of English should be used. It would be possible, I suppose, to develop one of the substandard varieties of Nigerian English for use within Nigeria; but this course would be less profitable than keeping to the internationally acceptable 'Standard English'. Standard English is the variety which is found in novels, textbooks, and newspapers published by mother tongue-speakers of English and by others using this as a model. By and large there is a common set of morphological, syntactic and semantic rules for such instances of Standard English; and whereas a small set of dialect differences exist between British, American and Nigerian Standard English, they differ from each other significantly only in pronunciation. Provided the pronunciation permits mutual intelligibility, regional divergences are perfectly acceptable. The advantage of Standard English is its international viability; and to derive the benefits of this, Nigeria should, so far as is possible, make Standard English the model to be taught in schools, to be used in textbooks and official documents, and preferably
in newspapers and literary works. There is no reason why Standard English should (and indeed it will not) be the model for the English used in ordinary speech between Nigerians.

In the foreseeable future the national language of Nigeria will not, whatever it may be, be the mother tongue of a majority of the population; and I therefore assume that teaching and learning it will take up a significant proportion of the school curriculum and will affect the educational policy of the country. Pandit Nehru once said of India:

‘English was a foreign language. We were greatly handicapped by having it as our medium of instruction. But we were also greatly benefitted in one way, that all educated people in the country thought and expressed themselves in the same language. It cemented the national unity. It was such a great boon to us that I should have advocated its retention as the medium of instruction had it not been fundamentally wrong to impart education through a foreign language.’ (Quoted in Dakin 1968: 49.)

No doubt some Nigerians would agree with Nehru’s sentiments, which are equally applicable to their own country. But in Nigeria as in India, it would be utterly impossible for education beyond the lowest levels to be conducted in the mother tongue of more than a minority of the nation; the majority therefore will be educated in a ‘foreign’ language, even though it may be one indigenous to the country. To those who share Nehru’s view this must still be ‘fundamentally wrong’, although it is difficult to see what else could be done; and to some extent at least it nullifies Nehru’s particular objection to English. Where English is the medium of instruction all Nigerians are similarly ‘handicapped’; but were an indigenous language to be used, those for whom it is the mother tongue would be favoured and the rest of the people ‘handicapped’: this would constitute tribal favouritism, which is a powerfully divisive force in a nation. In India the resistance to Hindi has led many States to use local languages in post-primary education, thus severely weakening the status of Hindi and at the same time encouraging the balkanisation of the country; it remains to be seen whether the compulsory teaching of Hindi in schools will counteract this tendency. To avoid this kind of situation, Nigeria would do well to learn from India’s experience. In order to promote national unity and ease social mobility, as large a percentage as possible of the population should be able to freely use the national language. To bring this about it would be preferable to use it as a medium of instruction in all post-primary education. At the present time, this situation obtains with English in Nigeria.

If, however, an indigenous language were chosen, a number of short term educational problems would arise. Many teachers would be unable to use it as a medium of instruction simply because they are unfamiliar with it. Even those who do speak the language might find difficulty in using it to teach, having themselves been taught in English, having learned in English, and having previously prepared their lessons in English; for them the appropriate language for an educational context
will be English, and sociolinguists and psycholinguists have shown that switching to another language under such circumstances would not be a simple matter of translation, but a learning of new norms by the teacher. Another relevant fact is that Nigeria still relies quite heavily on expatriate teachers in many institutions of higher learning; so long as English is used the situation can continue as before. The instituting of an indigenous language as the medium of instruction would have to await the replacement of expatriates unless the educative process is to be seriously disrupted. These problems could perhaps be dealt with during a long enough change over period (though the standard of education during that period might be expected to fall), and they do not in themselves constitute serious counter-arguments to the adoption of an indigenous national language. But the educationist will find more problems, such as the non-availability of vocabulary, the lack of appropriate texts, and the eventual cost of producing them. It is, furthermore, very important to note that unless tribal favouritism is to be practised (the dangers of which have been discussed already) many teachers using the new national language will have learned it as a second language, and their competence in it will be roughly commensurate with their competence in English heretofore: one could not, therefore, expect a general rise in teaching standards.

But does the student learn more efficiently if an indigenous language is used as the medium of instruction? The 1951 Report of the Unesco Meeting of Specialists confidently asserted (p. 711) that ‘every pupil should begin his formal education in his mother tongue’ and many others have agreed with this idealistic maxim. Taken in the Nigerian context there are three objections to it. One is that with between 250 and 500 languages spoken in Nigeria it would probably be impossible for every child to be taught in his mother tongue even at the lowest levels and if the schools were all unilingual, because there are simply too many languages in which parallel materials would have to be produced. Under localised multilingual conditions, such as frequently obtain in towns and cities, some children are bound to learn through a foreign language; and whether this be English or a Nigerian language it still violates the principle of education through the mother tongue. The second objection is that proliferation of teaching in vernacular at any level above the primary school will lead to the linguistic balkanisation of the country, the limitations on social mobility, etc. (cf. supra, p. 403). The third objection is that it has never been proven experimentally that children do learn better through their mother tongue: indeed the only experiments known to me show that it makes no difference whether the mother tongue or a foreign language is used (Dakin 1968: 26 sq.; Wingard 1963: 114 sq.). Even if formal education does begin in the mother tongue its continuation is very likely in some other language, which means there has to be a switch of media typically after only a few years’ schooling; no one has yet demonstrated an optimal solution to this problem.
I conclude that teaching in the mother tongue would be impossible or impracticable for all Nigerians and it would in any case have unwelcome effects if continued beyond the lowest levels. For a majority of Nigerians there would be little or no gain from the change because it would not be their mother tongue anyway; thus we should not expect any general rise in student standards any more than we should expect a rise in teachers’ standards.

It should be remembered that teaching in the vernacular is by no means always greeted warmly. Early attempts by missionaries in the south of Nigeria to teach in the vernacular were often rejected in favour of an English medium of instruction (Graham 1966: 22, 24-25, 136; Awolowo 1960: 65; Olafimihan quoted in Shaplin 1969: 77; Shaplin 1969: 66). Layeni (1970: 17) gives the reason:

'[Many Yoruba parents] hold the erroneous view that to be truly educated one must be literate in English, French, or any other modern European language, even on pain of learning such a language by rote. To them Yoruba as a language is of no economic and educational value.'

A similarly favourable attitude was held in the North by non-native speakers towards Hausa (North Regional Literacy Campaign Handbook for 1954: 5). But I suspect that nowadays the ambitious youngster in the North hoping to make his way in modern Nigeria would as soon study English as Hausa, which he will learn in any case through every day commerce. The best chance of success for the individual is through a good command of the national language and this results in prejudice against studying other languages, particularly if the student already speaks them.

How good a command of English can the Nigerian child be expected to have? I can only answer by induction from such observations as the following:

'Objective data gathered by the team indicate that achievement in English language skills among Nigerian boys and girls in school lags considerably behind that of counterparts in native English speaking countries. This sort of comparison is not fair and not particularly meaningful, except for the fact that many of the communications tasks requiring English which the Nigerian boy and girl must face both in school and on the job are similar to, if not identical with, the tasks faced by the native speaker.' (Jacobs 1966: 9, 102.)

I believe that what is said here about the average Nigerian child’s command of English would be true for any Nigerian language other than the child’s mother tongue. The root of the average Nigerian child’s problem with English lies in the primary school. English is used as the medium of instruction in primary schools beginning in some places from the first year, in others as late as the fourth, with earlier education in the vernacular (cf. Tiffen 1966; Tiffen, ed., 1968 on 'straight for English'). In fact, according to Shaplin (1969: 27) even when English is supposed to be
the medium of instruction it is often mixed with vernacular; if this aids
the children’s education it is obviously no bad thing, but the Shaplin
(1969: 52) are pessimistic: ‘It may be said, we feel, that no completely
effective language of instruction exists in Nigerian primary schools.’

Taking English to be the official medium for most of the child’s
primary schooling, what is wrong? First of all the teachers: according
to Shaplin (1969: 4) three quarters of primary school teachers are un-
trained to teach in either the mother tongue or English. Certainly
when Tiffen and others subjectively assessed the spoken English of
32 teachers of the ‘straight for English’ course in Nigeria they found only
3 of them good, 15 acceptable, and 14 poor; a roughly commensurate lack
of ability or basic equipment affected other aspects of English teaching
(Tiffen, ed., 1968: 14 sq.). The standard of English spoken and taught by
primary school teachers can be expected to be low simply because they
are the least qualified teachers. One practical though elitist curative
might be to have specialist teachers in remedial English for those children
progressing to post-primary education; but whether ingrained deviations
from Standard English could be erased in such a way is dubious. Ideally
one would improve the standard of English among all primary school
teachers and make them forcefully aware of the language problems faced
by their charges. It would help here if the change from English lessons
to English medium of instruction could be better managed than it often
is. The language used in teaching is sometimes far more complex than
what has been learned in English lessons, with a resulting lack of
comprehension on the child’s part (Shaplin 1969: 14; Wingard 1963); this
is a situation which could be corrected by more careful monitoring of the
language used in instruction. Making primary school teachers aware of
this problem and preparing materials to help them solve it must be
an early step towards the amelioration of English teaching in Nigerian
primary schools; hopefully this may eventually effect a closer
approximation to Standard English, which I have suggested should be
the model for the educated Nigerian in formal situations. I cannot see
how the inadequacies of the primary teacher will be rectified by the
replacement of English with a Nigerian language, unless it happens to be
the teacher’s mother tongue.

In discussing the merits and demerits of English as the national
language of Nigeria I have argued that the following three advantages
rest in the retention of the status quo. Firstly, English is a’ready the
national language and there will be no necessity for the drastic changes
and expenses brought about by another language replacing it. Secondly,
English is not the native language of any indigenous tribe and its national
status maintains equality of opportunity for all Nigerians. Thirdly,
English—as the most widely spoken international language—is the
medium for a vast pool of literature and informative materials on multi-
farious topics, and to retain it as the national language permits all
educated Nigerians to both draw on and contribute to this pool. Whereas
the advantages of English as the national language cannot at present be matched by any Nigerian language, its disadvantages would, to a greater or lesser extent, be shared by an indigenous national language. Though English is genetically distinct from all Nigerian languages, there are at least two distinct language families within Nigeria, so the opponent of English on this score is by no means on firm ground. It is true that English is not the mother tongue of more than a handful of Nigerians, but then there is no indigenous language which is the mother tongue of more than about 20% of Nigerians (but see footnote 3). And while there is no large body of Nigerian teachers with native speaker competence in English to inculcate a high standard of English in the schools, at the present time and for the foreseeable future this would be true for any indigenous Nigerian language. It is sometimes objected that English is the language of an alien culture; but this criticism would be true to a greater or lesser extent of an indigenous language for those Nigerians who do not speak it as a mother tongue. Furthermore, the ‘alien culture’ associated with English is also called ‘modernisation’, ‘development’, ‘technological progress’ and the like; under such aliases it is welcome to many Nigerians. I therefore conclude that the merits of English outweigh its demerits, and submit that Nigeria has nothing to lose by retaining English as its national language, and may indeed be better able to maintain national unity and more rapid modernisation, while saving on manpower resources and money which would have to be expended on a change to a new national language. It is notable that my own students at Ahmadu Bello University generally agreed with this conclusion, and so apparently would many other Nigerians:

"... an attempt was made to interview a number of people from all walks of life in order to assess the importance of English language to the present and future development of Nigeria [...] the great majority of interviewees considered English to be an essential medium of communication without which Nigeria could neither possess the unity of resources and talent needed for development nor foster the social, business and scientific changes that constitute development." (Jacobs 1966: 49.)

The Congress of Black Intellectuals at Rome in 1958 declared themselves in favour of a single official language for the whole of sub-Saharan Africa; but,

"L'accord a cessé quand il s'est agi de déterminer laquelle, et le Congrès s'est séparé sans avoir fait autre chose que présenter une liste de candidatures possibles, qui comprend, dans son dernier état, le wolof, le mande, le peul, le hausa, le yoruba et le swahili.

Les discussions préliminaires avaient, bien entendu — je le dis sans ironie aucune — été conduites en anglais et surtout en français: toute l'affaire en devenait, en quelque sorte, symbolique de la situation souvent paradoxale de l'Afrique actuelle." (Alexandre 1963: 55.)

The terrible irony that Africans should declare their independence of
European domination through a European language holds both at the international and the national level, as does the difficulty of selecting one indigenous language for the purposes of intercommunal communication. In choosing a national language to have the external function of manifesting national unity, and the internal function of fostering prestige in corporate harmony through a nationwide medium of communication, idealistic aspirations must give way to practical considerations. It is these practical considerations that I have been discussing in this essay.

My thesis is that the adoption of an indigenous language as the national language would give its speakers at the least the semblance, and probably the reality of hegemony over the other tribes in the nation. I have argued that Hausa is best suited to be the national language of Nigeria, but that it would be unacceptable to many people in the South, who need no reminder of Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa’s words in a Legislative Council debate in 1953: ‘I should like to make it clear to you that if the British quitted Nigeria now at this stage the Northern people would continue their interrupted conquest to the sea.’ (Quoted in Kirk-Greene 1971: 428.) Although I suspect that Balewa was not seriously threatening any such action, he was voicing the fears of the Southerners, which don’t seem to have diminished today. So one has to reject the implementation of Hausa as the national language for being a likely source of disunity in the country.

For the same reason, one is forced to reject the proposal that the three major languages Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo should all be made national languages; this would only revitalise the pre-civil war power blocks. A larger number of national languages, perhaps defined on the twelve States of Nigeria, would tend to balkanise the country and lead to the linguistic chaos which obtained in the Habsburg Empire and seems to be establishing itself in modern India. I am therefore forced to consider the merits and demerits of the existing situation which has English as the de facto national language. This has a number of advantages, perhaps the most important being that it preserves national unity because English is neutral between the power blocks within the country, giving none any advantage over the others.

To keep English as Nigeria’s national language need not inhibit the study and development of indigenous languages, or even their adoption as official languages at State level if this is thought desirable. A multi-

---

7. A similar irony of fate was experienced by delegates to the Panslavic Congress at Prague in 1849 which met to assert Slav independence of German domination: they found that the only language they had in common was German (Hayes 1960: 72).
8. It has been suggested that under such conditions one of the indigenous languages will emerge as a nationwide lingua franca (Mohmed 1972: 97) but I doubt this: compare multilingual Nigeria with multilingual Europe, and the use of English in Nigeria with the use of Latin in Europe prior to the Renaissance; none of the modern national languages of Europe emerged as a lingua franca to replace Latin.
cultural nation like Nigeria has more than one ‘pedigree’ as Dr. Johnson called it; each tribe may exhibit its pedigree through its own language, while the many facets of the Nigerian nation are reflected by the English language.9

9. It could be that I am unconsciously guilty of linguistic imperialism in proposing that my own mother tongue should be the national language of Nigeria. In defense of my honour let me say firstly that the rational arguments in favour of such a proposal are very strong, and secondly that on prima facie evidence I am happy to back Swahili against English as the national language for Kenya. The detailed arguments for my position would constitute another paper, but very briefly they are as follows: Swahili is one of the international languages of East Africa, spoken fairly widely up-country as well as on the coast; it has been written for a long time and has a growing body of literature; it is not a divisive force in Kenya (as some other indigenous languages would be if instituted as the national language) because the Waswahili are not a politically powerful group. The main disadvantage of Swahili is the shortage in the language of educational and informative texts in many fields, and this can only be rectified at great expense. The advantage of English in this matter remains. But overall there are strong arguments in favour of adopting Swahili as Kenya’s national language. Because circumstances in Nigeria are different, rational arguments favour the retaining of English as the national language: linguistic imperialism is not the basis for these arguments.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

AJARCHUKWU, N.

ALEXANDRE, P.

AWOLowo, O.

BALLARD, J. A.

BELLO, Alhaji, Sir Ahmadu
1962 My Life (Cambridge, CUP).

COHEN, R.
1967 ‘Divergence and Convergence in Nigerian Culture and Politics’, in O. OLA-
kanPO, R. COHEN & J. PADEN, eds., Problems of Integration and Disinte-

COLEMAN, J. S.
1958 Nigeria: Background to Nationalism (Berkeley, University of California Press).


Jacobs, R., ed. 1966 English Language Teaching in Nigeria (Lagos, Ministry of Education).


Johnson, S. 1775 A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland (London).


Mohamed, A. 1972 ‘The Search for a Lingua Franca and Standards in Nigeria Education’, Work in Progress (Zaria, Nigeria, Ahmadu Bello University, Dept. of English) 1: 96-112.
Morgan, K.

Nigeria

Nigeria. Executive Branch. Education Dept.
1954 *North Regional Literacy Campaign: Handbook for 1954* (Zaria, Nigeria, Gaskiya Corp.).

Nigeria. Legislative Branch
1948 *Legislative Council Debates* (Lagos, Government Printer), vol. II.

O’Connell, J.

Ola, C. S.
1960 ‘Now is the Time for One Language’, *Daily Express*, 30 Sept.

Parliamentary Debates, First Parliament, Second Session

Payne, S.

Rudolph, L. I. & S. H.

Sapir, E.

Schwarz, F. A. O.

Schwarz, W.

Seton-Watson, H.

Shaplin, M. J. & J. T.

Solarin, T.

Sutherland, R. E.
This paper was written in 1973. In 1976 Nigeria was divided into 19 States: former Kano, Kwara, Rivers and Lagos States remain; North-Central is now Kaduna, Mid-Western is Bendel, South-Eastern is Cross River; Western State is divided into Ogun, Ondo, and Oyo; East-Central into Imo and Anambra; North-Western into Niger and Sokoto; Benue-Plateau into Benue and Plateau; North-Western into Bauchi, Bornu, and Gongola. It was a move towards linguistic homogeneity within State boundaries.