

**THE LINGUISTIC SITUATION IN
NIGERIA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS
FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Da mihi locum stare et terram movebo

*An Inaugural Lecture delivered
at the University of Ibadan*

on Thursday, 16th October, 2008

by

ALEXANDER U. IWARA

*Professor of Linguistics
Institute of African Studies
University of Ibadan*

UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN

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Preamble

It is for me a singular honour and a great privilege to be called upon to deliver, on behalf of the Faculty of Arts, the first of this session's series of inaugural lectures. This is particularly so because it is the first time that the Institute of African Studies is being given this kind of opportunity for the second year running. I take it, therefore, with relish.

My objective in choosing for this lecture the topic on offer: "The Linguistic Situation in Nigeria and its Implications for Sustainable Development" is a straightforward one. I want to cover a range of linguistic issues on which I have worked and reflected deeply over the past thirty years or so and which appear to me to be of relevance to Nigeria today. In the process, I hope to share with you my take on these issues and some of my contributions to linguistic knowledge in those areas.

From what I have just said about my objective in this lecture, it is clear that it is going to be biased in favour of socially relevant research. This is in response to this university's vocation, which is aptly expressed in its motto: *recte sapere fons*, a veritable spring (*fons*) from which sprouts exact knowledge (*sapere*) to form men and women who are worthy in character and sound judgment for society (*recte*).

The Latin proverb: *Da mihi locum stare et terram movebo* encapsulates the ultimate point of this lecture. My predilection for the immutable Latin form is induced by my perception that the English translation "Give me a place to stand and I shall move the earth" is rather pedestrian, whereas the Latin, dead language or not, delivers its message in a magisterial manner and with economy, as it might be said in discourse analysis.

One final point and I am done with the preamble. Before I came into linguistics, my research interest was in French seventeenth-century theatre. My earlier exposure to Greco-Roman literature, to the philosophers Aristotle and Plato, to the Greek playwrights Aeschylus, Aristophanes and Euripides, to the Roman writers and poets Virgil, Seneca, Ovid, Caesar and Cicero, to mention but a few, gave me unimpeded access to the neo-classical plays of Corneille, Racine and Molière and the best of their literary critics: Sainte Beuve, Brunetière, Jules Lemaître, Gustave Lanson, Henri Bornier, Charles Péguy, Tanquéry, Robert Brasillach, Paul Bénichou, René Bray, Antoine Adam, George Couton, Jacques Maurens, Octave Nadal, Serge Doubrovsky and André Stegmann, and so many others. At that time, Corneille, whose tragedies provided themes for my Master's and Ph.D. theses, was depicted as the champion of Spartan stoicism and Roman devotion to duty and patriotism, so that the tragic conflicts he portrayed between honour and love seemed always to end in the victory of *la gloire, le devoir* and *l'honneur*. But we were able to show that, as in *Le Cid*,

C' est principalement à l'amour, intégré à la notion de la gloire et de l'honneur que Le Cid doit son éternel succès non seulement en considération du rôle capital qu'il joue dans la création d'une situation dramatique des plus tragiques, conforme d'ailleurs aux règles d'Aristote, mais également par la beauté des sentiments qu'il inspire aux personnages...Composée deux ans seulement après Médée qui était caractérisée par la pathétique d'horreur sénéquien, cette pièce, fondée, comme elle l'est, sur l'ardeur, la fierté et les mouvements imprévisibles des jeunes amants sympathiques, marque une étape décisive dans l'évolution de la dramaturgie cornélienne. (Iwara 1975:36)

In 1973, my supervisor at the Sorbonne, Professor Raymond Picard, published his book on Corneille which took on board and incorporated our analysis two years earlier with respect to Corneille's later tragedies *Sertorius* (1662) and *Sophonisbe*

(1663). It was, as my supervisor in Wales, Professor R. C. Knight said, a dramatic vindication of our new perspective on the Cornelian concept of the tragic hero.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen, permit me to rest my case on French classical literature there and take on our linguistics business for today.

Introduction

This lecture is divided into two parts. The first part covers the language situation in Nigeria and deals with three issues, namely:

- (i) The multilingual status of Nigeria;
- (ii) The national language question; and
- (iii) Nigeria's national language policy.

The second part focuses on the role of language in the thinking process and its implication for sustainable development in Nigeria.

The conclusion arising from our discussion of all these issues is in the form of a recommendation for action by the Federal Government. This recommendation is based on a hypothesis I have long held, that language is a key factor in the thinking process, and is, therefore, a critical tool in the development paradigm.

But before we go into the heart of the matter, it would seem reasonable to begin by clarifying two basic concepts that I consider fundamentally important for this lecture: *linguistics* and *language*.

Linguistics

The scientific study of language, which is shorthand for linguistics, is not a new academic subject, but it may be said to have come into its own only in the last fifty years with Chomsky's revolutionary introduction of transformational grammar in 1957. But I would not be surprised if some of you do not have a very clear idea of what exactly my colleagues in the field and I are supposed to be professing. For such people, a brief introduction to linguistics will not be inappropriate.

When we say that linguistics is a scientific study of language, we mean that it is an empirical study devoted mostly to human language. This study is carried out at different levels of analysis: phonological (phonetic and phonemic), morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. Phonetics deals with meaningless physical speech sounds or phones, which may be either consonants or vowels. Phonemics studies these sounds in particular languages where each unit is now called a phoneme and conveys meaning. Phonology then examines the patterns in which these sounds occur. Morphology, for its part, is the study of word formation in units called morphemes, which may occur as prefixes, stems or suffixes in the structure of words. Syntax deals with sentences and the rules that apply to make them grammatical. Semantics studies the meaning of words and sentences based on their dictionary meaning. Pragmatics, on the other hand, is the study of meanings of sentences according to their context. Linguistics is much more complex than this, but for this lecture this functional definition should do.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, having briefly sketched what linguistics, broadly speaking, is all about, I have a feeling that this is an exercise in futility if I do not go on to say what contribution I have specifically made to the field to become a professor. Permit me, therefore, to begin from the beginning and to draw our attention to my M.Phil. thesis in 1982, which, with all modesty, has come to be acknowledged as ground breaking research, in part, I presume, for being the first time that the Lokaa language was systematically subjected to such detailed analysis. The thesis, published in 1990 under the title *Lokaa Phonology and Grammar*, easily covers all these levels of linguistic analysis. Indeed, this work was not only presented as a model of systematic descriptive analysis by the famous linguist, Professor Larry Hyman of UCLA at the 2002 World Linguistic Congress held at Rutgers University, New Jersey, where our own Professor Ben Elugbe also presented a Lead Paper on the same podium, but it has now become a reference book for all those interested in Lokaa linguistic study in all Departments of Linguistics throughout the Nigerian university system.

While on this, may I seek your indulgence, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, to add that, working on the Future Tense Negation of some verbs with Professor Akinbiyi Akinlabi, a First Class graduate of the Department of Linguistics of this university, and later a lecturer in the same Department, who had to go abroad for greener pastures, and Professor Hubert Truckenbrodt, a German phoneticist, both of Rutgers University, where I spent my Fulbright Scholar Award year, we discovered for the first time in the history of linguistics that a cluster of three tonemes could be pressed together into a significant tonal contour over a double-iambic or long-vowel space normally reserved for a two-tone pattern only. This discovery has since been reported to the linguistic world in an article entitled "The Tonal Phonology and Phonetics of the Future Negative in Lokaa" in an international publication titled *Linguistic Typology and Representation of African Languages* (2003), edited by John Mugane.

Extensive research on Lokaa has also led to other significant contributions to linguistics. In line with my desire to achieve excellence in research that is relevant to linguistics in general, and to my people in particular, I have worked, over the years, with the Yakurr Orthography Council to devise an orthography for the Lokaa language, which has been approved and published in 2000 by the Language Centre of the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (N.E.R.D.C.) at Abuja. I consider this achievement as one of the high points of my linguistic career.

And may I take this opportunity also, Mr Vice-Chancellor, to thank this great University for the publication by the University Press of two research projects on Lokaa, first, a book titled *Numeration in Lokaa* (1986), which is a proposal aimed at creating a decimal counting system to enable the Yakurr people to cope with and mentally conceptualize the high numerals usually contained in the national budget, and second, a book on the Lokaa Alphabet titled *Mbiisii Ya Lokaa* (1989).

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, there is no doubt that descriptive linguistics has been, over the past thirty years, the love of my life as the following publications in this area indicate: "Criteria for identifying zero-prefix nouns in Lokaa" published in our own *African Notes* (1983); "Compound Nominal Prefixing and

its Implications for Synchronic Noun Forms in Lokaa” published in *Forum: Journal of the Linguistic Association of Canada and the United States* (1985); “The Tense System of Lokaa” published in Cologne in a book titled *The Tense System of English and Nigerian Languages* (1991) edited by Okon Essien; “The relative Clause in Lokaa” published in the *Journal of Nigerian Languages* (1993) edited by our own Sister Angela Uwalaka of blessed memory; “The Vowel Harmony System in Lokaa” published in the *Nigerian Language Studies* (1994) and edited by Nolue Emenanjo; and “Nominalization in Lokaa” published by the Linguistic Association of Nigeria (LAN) in a book titled *Language and Literature in a Changing World* (1996) edited by my humble self, to mention a few. But nothing has given me greater satisfaction than the desire I have kindled in the hearts of the Yakurr people to read and write their own language with the publication of my book titled *Reading and Writing Lokaa*, which came out in 1988.

Language

The other concept, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, that I would like to dispose of before getting to the core of the lecture is language, because linguistics, even from its etymology, is nothing if it is not about *language*.

First, I would like to note that the term is somewhat difficult to define in a comprehensive manner, as many linguists, including myself, have testified (Iwara 1995; Lyons 1981; Robins 1964). Elugbe (1991:42) aptly summarizes this difficulty: “it is impossible to find a definition against which we could not raise at least one objection.” And so, although we have had several often quoted definitions of language by well respected linguists, such as Chomsky (1957:13), who defined it as “a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and contracted out of a finite set of elements”; Robins (1964:14), who said that languages are “symbol systems based on pure or arbitrary convention”; Fromkin and Rodman (1974:2), who, for their part, thought of it as “a system by which sounds and meanings are related”; Hall (1968:158), who saw it as “the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary

symbols"; Hudson (1980:85), who, from a sociolinguistic perspective, saw it in terms of cultural behaviour, as

a set of remembered concepts, which are the items of language, together with the concepts or propositions which constitute their meanings, and more concepts which define social distribution.

and finally Greenberg (1971:156), who presented it as a uniquely *human* possession:

Language is unique to man. No other species possesses a truly symbolic means of communication and no human society, however simple its material culture, lacks the basic human heritage of a well developed language.

I have had time to study all these definitions, each of which has something definite to contribute. But they all have one defect in trying to provide a single definition to cover the meaning of *language as a medium of communication* as well as *language as a speech form that is mutually unintelligible with any other speech form*. I am, therefore, proposing two definitions for *language*, the first as a system of communication, and the second as a speech form in contrast to a dialect.

Language as a System of Communication

Language as a system of communication may refer to human or non-human forms of language.

The non-human varieties include animal noises, sign language, Braille, navy signals, road signs such as the colours of traffic lights, body language featuring gestures and gesticulations, making faces, body movements and postures and gaits, spatial distance between interlocutors, where nearness may be an indication of emotional closeness, and even the language of silence, which, upon occasion, can communicate more effectively than words. Their communicative capacity is severely restricted in scope to expressions of emotions and

sentiments such as fear, as when a hen sounds an alarm cue to its chicks at the approach of a hawk or some other predator.

It is true that some animals, such as dogs and chimpanzees, can emit elaborate noises, bark or shriek to cover quite a wide range of meanings. However, no dog is ever going to have the language competence to tell you that its parents were poor but honest. No bee, however fascinating its communication dance, will be able to tell you that its mother died when their hive was burnt down a week ago.

On the other hand, human language is a system of symbols or representations of things, such that the words it employs to communicate stand for things but are not themselves things and the meanings of these symbols are inside people's heads, where they are associated with, and shaped to some extent by, individual experiences. For instance, the sight of a dog in one culture may, by mutual consent, stimulate a powerful feeling of love and affection, whereas, in another, it may conjure up an exciting urge to kill and eat it.

In addition, human languages are dynamic: they are infinitely extendable and modifiable according to the changing needs and conditions of the speakers. Observe the immediate adaptation of our local languages to the scientific discoveries and the concomitant changes that have taken place over the centuries and are still taking place today. And words do evolve new meanings over time, as, for example, the word 'bad' which now may also mean 'good', and 'gay' which used to mean 'happy', 'bright' or 'merry' but is now an acceptable term for 'homosexual'. Finally, words do also change their meaning from one part of the world or country to another. The example I have often used in my work to illustrate this is the word 'crusade', which, among Pentecostal Christians in southern Nigeria, means a prayer convention, but does not have this meaning in Europe; in fact, among Muslims in northern Nigeria, it is quite likely to be taken to mean a 'holy war' if it is translated to 'jihad'. And the word 'brother' in Nigeria and many parts of Black Africa has a much more extended meaning than, say, in Europe where the cultural notion of a family unit is restricted.

Human language is, therefore, in a class of its own. As O'Grady, Dobrovolsky and Aronoff (1989:9) put it, "the

evolutionary adaptation of certain physiological mechanisms for linguistic ends has occurred only in humans.” More than this, human language is in a unique position because it alone “is able to relate its symbols to every part and every sort of human experience and to all the furniture of earth and heaven; and for this reason all other symbol systems are explained by reference to it” (Robins 1978:13).

Therefore, in view of the centrality and predominance of human language in the conception of language as a system of communication, my contribution to the definition of the term is to say that it is a unified system of symbols conventionally agreed among its users to permit a sharing of meaning.

Language as a Language or Dialect

My second definition of *language* aims at distinguishing between ‘a language’ and ‘a dialect’. Indeed these two terms are commonly confused in informal and non-linguistic usage. Dialect, in particular, has a somewhat pejorative connotation as it is thought to be “merely a local variant of a ‘central’ language” (Crozier and Blench 1992:1). Many people tend to qualify a speech variety as a language if it is well known, with millions of speakers, and as a dialect if its speakers are few in number and not known outside its borders. In other words, speech forms seem to be categorized on the basis of the numerical strength of their speakers and their economic status, such that speech forms of wider circulation like English, Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo easily qualify in Nigeria as languages, whereas obscure speech forms, like Lokaa in Cross River state, for example, are put down as dialects. What I need to do now therefore is to attempt a rigorous definition of the two terminologies: *a language* and *a dialect*.

A language, simply put, is a speech form that is mutually unintelligible with any other speech form. This means that two speech varieties that are genetically related are nevertheless taken to be two separate languages if they are not mutually intelligible. For instance, linguists often say that Yoruba and Igbo are genetically related in view of the fact that they both possess a large number of words that correspond in form and

meaning, correspondences which are not thought to be coincidental by any means, as shown in table 1.

Table 1: Yoruba and Igbo Cognates of Common Lexical Items

Yoruba	Igbo	English Gloss
oba	obi	king
omi	miri	water
isu	ji	yam
ewure	ewu	goat
ologbo	onogbo	cat
enu	onu	mouth
apa	aka	arm, hand
orun	onu	neck
oko	ogo ugbo	farm
ile	ulo	house
ile	ala	land
odo	odo	mortar
ori	isi	head
ogede	ogede	plantain, banana
eti	nti	ear
ewa	agwa	beans
iyawo	nwunye	wife

But because the two speech forms are not mutually intelligible, it is taken that Igbo and Yoruba are two separate and distinct languages. Similarly, Yoruba and Epira are said to be genetically related in that they have many words of common origin, apart from the fact that they are contiguous. But on the basis of mutual intelligibility principle alone, they must be regarded as two different languages.

Conversely, speech forms that are mutually intelligible are taken to be dialects of the same language. We know that there are differences in terms of lexical items and pronunciation between Oyo Yoruba and Ekiti Yoruba. Yet, these two speech forms are mutually intelligible, and so they are regarded as dialects of the same Yoruba language. In the same way, Abakaliki Igbo and Onitsha Igbo exhibit differences in vocabulary and pronunciation, but because the two speech forms are mutually intelligible, they are considered to be dialects of the same Igbo language.

From a purely linguistic point of view, therefore, a dialect may be defined as a regional variant of another speech form. For linguists, there is no presupposition about the importance or otherwise of a dialect in relation to other dialects in the cluster. Because of the common prejudice surrounding the word *dialect*, the more usual term *lect* is slowly coming into increasing use among linguists to describe any type of distinctive speech form.

But the classification of speech forms into languages or dialects on the basis of mutual intelligibility is not as simple as these definitions might suggest. For one thing, research into improving mutual intelligibility testing is on-going. For another, borderline cases do occur where mutual intelligibility is inadequate to decide whether a speech form is a language or a dialect. In such cases, sociolinguistic and lexicostatistical factors are taken into account. And borderline cases cannot be ruled out where a decision is problematic on account of insufficient knowledge of the phonology and syntax of the speech forms being compared. It is questions like these that render the delimitation of speech forms into languages and dialects difficult. It must be assumed, therefore, that the number of 400 languages given by Hansford, Bendor-Samuel and Stanford as well as by Crozier and Blench for Nigeria is largely tentative.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, we have there two definitions of the term language. I am not aware of any linguist who has put forward these two concepts as a unified definition of *language*. It is my contribution to the definition of the term 'language'.

The Linguistic Situation in Nigeria

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, let us now turn our attention to the core of the lecture. As we indicated earlier, this first part consists of three sections. The first section has to do with the multilingual status of Nigeria. The linguistic and other language-related problems that Nigeria has, and which are at the centre of the following two sections, all emanate from this multilingual status.

(i) *The Multilingual Status of Nigeria*

Indeed, it is commonly agreed that Nigeria is a multilingual country *par excellence*. This is usually understood to be true in

three significant ways. Firstly, it is taken to mean that of all the countries of Africa, Nigeria stands out as a country where three of the continent's four major language phyla are most represented. Secondly, the statement is understood to mean that there is a large-scale endogenous bilingualism right across the country, such that many people and especially the minority communities find that they need a second indigenous language for communication and interaction with the linguistically dominant group in their immediate local environment, a second language that they usually learn as a necessity for daily interaction with a powerful neighbour. And finally, it is understood that many Nigerians, whether they belong to majority or minority linguistic communities, increasingly find themselves in a diglossic situation in which, on the one hand, they use English, the country's official language medium and the language for formal education, for formal government business and, on the other, their indigenous languages or pidgin for domestic and informal communication. Nigeria, therefore, presents an interesting linguistic case that cannot but be a relevant issue, not only in terms of its social and political integration, but also, even more significantly, in terms of the actualization of the ethnically-based aspirations within the context of the genuine development of the country as a whole.

Rough estimates abound as to the number of languages spoken in Africa. The Ottenbergs (1960), for instance, suggest the figure of 800 languages, whereas Bendor-Samuel (1989) puts the number at 1,900. The truth of the matter is that no one knows for certain how many they are. Part of the difficulty lies in the nature of the languages. As we all know, languages, somewhat like their speakers, can and do die and become extinct, especially the small languages, when the circumstances of their continued existence become untenable for social, political, economic or other reasons.

Another difficulty is the manner of defining *a language*, as we said earlier. The Ottenbergs, who were anthropologists, had a broader, cultural view of language while Bendor-Samuel, a linguist, used the principle of mutual intelligibility and lexicostatistics as his yardstick. This would explain the huge difference in the estimates put forward by them. In the case of

the Ottenbergs, languages that have cultural affinities are lumped together, even if they are not mutually intelligible. Bendor-Samuel is stricter in his delimitation of languages, so the languages are described as cognates only if they possess lexicostatistic similarity of approximately 80% in terms of their morphological and semantic correspondences.

But the number of major language families found in the continent is far less controversial. Although the Ottenbergs divided the languages into six major families, it is Greenberg's classification in his *Languages of Africa* (1963) that is generally followed by scholars. His four families or phyla are as follows:

- The Afro-Asiatic Family of languages formerly called the Hamiti-Semitic, which are spoken in North Africa and part of East Africa. The phylum has two branches: the Semitic and the Chadic. Arabic belongs to the Semitic, while Hausa is the largest member of the Chadic branch.
- The Nilo-Saharan Family of languages, which are spoken in much of the Central and East Africa. Kanuri in Borno State and Zarma in Sokoto State represent different branches of the family.
- The Niger-Kordofanian Family of languages, which are spoken in West, Central and Southern Africa, include most of the Nigerian languages.
- The Khoisan Family of languages are spoken in the southwestern corner of Africa, in and around Namibia.

We should note that of these four major families, three are fully represented in Nigeria. These include the Afro-Asiatic with Hausa and its sister-languages, the Nilo-Saharan with Kanuri and related languages, and the Niger-Kordofanian with its widespread Niger-Congo and Benue-Congo sub-groups. The following tree diagrams (figs. 1, 2&3) showing the Nigerian component in these language families give us some idea of the multiplicity and complexity of Nigerian languages. This is a primary justification for Nigeria's acknowledged claim to be a multilingual country *par excellence*.



Fig. 1: The Afro-Asiatic language family (Adapted from Williamson 1989)

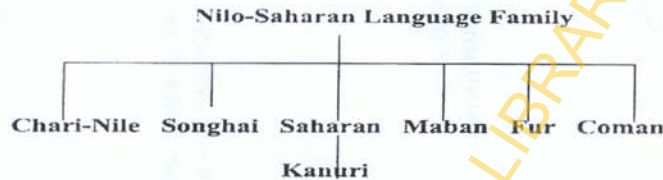


Fig. 2: The Nilo-Saharan language family (Adapted from Williamson)

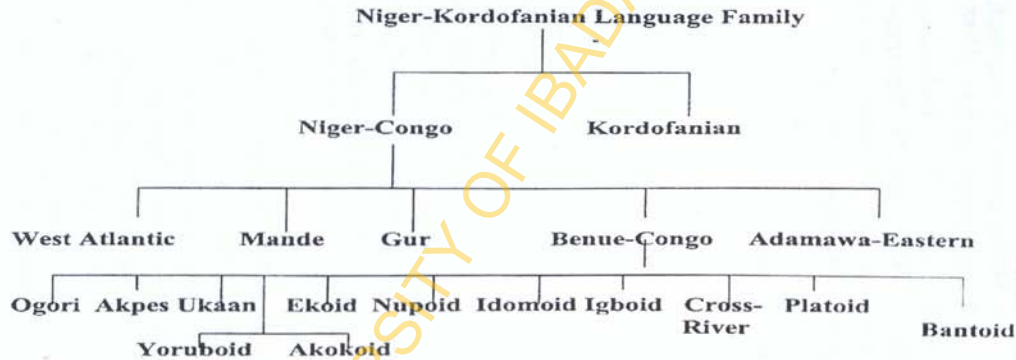


Fig. 3: The Niger-Kordofanian language family (Adapted from Williamson 1989)

As with the number of languages spoken in Africa as a whole, and for the same reasons, it is difficult to determine with absolute certainty the number of languages spoken in Nigeria today. Various estimates are quoted in scholarly publications and on the pages of national newspapers, but the figure commonly accepted by most linguists in Nigeria and elsewhere is 400, which is supplied by the field linguists of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) in Hanford *et al.* (1976) and Crozier and Brench (1992). Indeed, according to Vic Webb and Kembo-Sure (2000: 46-52), Cameroon, with 240 languages, is the only African country whose multilingual status is anywhere close to that of Nigeria's. If this number of languages (400) is accepted, which I do, then this is another justification for saying that Nigeria is more multilingual than any other African country, or any other country in the world for that matter.

Another aspect of this multilingualism in Nigeria is that, because of the high incidence of language diversity, quite a huge number of people do find themselves having to live along a borderline where it is convenient for them and their daily activities to be in possession of more than one language. Also, Nigerians, especially the Igbo, the Yoruba and generally people from the southern part of the country, are a mobile people, and when they move to areas outside their language community, they find they have to learn the language in their new environment for purposes of daily contact and commerce. So there is widespread endogenous bilingualism throughout the country.

(ii) *The National Language Question*

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, this is the canvas upon which the drama of the national language question played and continues to play itself out. Indeed, ever since Dr. Johnson in 1775 proffered his memorable words, that "languages are the pedigree of nations", many groups of people from all over the world, especially nationalist or militant groups, have manifested a remarkable tendency to identify language with nationality, and to proceed from there to associate both language and nationality with culture and race. Indeed, the tendency to think and act in this way has since then been so hugely popular and more or less

taken for granted that in every continent of the world, nations have come to be generally identified with particular languages and cultures.

In Europe, for instance, German nationality and German culture are closely identified with the German language, French nationality and culture with the French language, English nationality and culture with the English language, and Spanish nationality and culture with the Spanish language, to mention only these four.

In the former Soviet Union, for another example from Eastern Europe, the Russian language was used as an integrative instrument to hold together the amalgam of constitutive multilingual republics that frequently took pleasure in demonstrating their cultural and linguistic specificity.

Similarly, for many decades after 1865 in the United States of America, which is basically a country of immigrants from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the "English Only Movement" was launched and sustained by some state institutions that sought to create a sense of English national identity throughout the vast nation, and particularly in Spanish-dominated California and parts of Texas and Arizona.

In Canada, which is a union of British and French colonies, there is a bitter debate that is on-going about national and cultural identity which dates back to the eighteenth century because of the refusal of the francophone Quebecois to give up their French language in favour of that of their numerically stronger and therefore dominant English counterparts.

In China, as in India and the Far East generally, which are countries characterized, as in Africa, by multilingualism, a single language is commonly actively promoted by government decree to the status of a national language in order to create in the minds of the citizens a sense of national unity: the Peiping variety of Mandarin Chinese in China, Hindi (or Hindustani) in India, Malay in Malaysia, Bahasa in Indonesia, to cite but these few examples.

But it is in Africa, and particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, that this phenomenon is observed to be most pervasive as a result of the fact that these countries were hastily and arbitrarily partitioned by European colonialists, who at the moment of

partitioning them, were not concerned with the languages or cultures of their newly-acquired subjects. Without exception, these African countries felt most concerned at independence to maintain their territorial and political integrity in spite of or, rather, because of their perceived internal linguistic and cultural diversity. In some of these states, this concern took the form of legislation in favour of a single indigenous language as the national language, as in Somalia (Somali), Ethiopia (Amharic) and Tanzania (Swahili). In other states, where a similar solution was untenable because of existing political and ethnic tensions, either the colonial language alone was adopted as the official language or several languages, including the colonial one, were worked into the constitution to serve as national or official languages.

Therefore, whether in Europe and Asia, where an indigenous language is taken as the symbol of nationality, or in America and Africa, where it is a colonial language that is given that role, the truth of the matter is that languages are widely acknowledged as the pedigree of nations. And unscrupulous demagogues and 'nationalist' journalists and politicians have been known to exploit this notion to their advantage.

But this popular sentiment of Dr. Johnson's is a myth on three counts. Firstly, not a single one of the great languages of the world follows ethnic and racial geography at all closely. French, for example, as rightly pointed out by Potter (1960:28), is spoken by not less than three racial groups in France: Nordic in the north, Alpine in the centre, and Mediterranean in the south, and what is more, all these stocks are today freely represented elsewhere in Europe speaking different languages, such as German, Italian and Dutch. English provides another example: it is spoken natively by a heterogeneous group of peoples known under the collective name of Germanic peoples and including Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Gaelic races. This is not to mention other racially diverse native speakers of English who inhabit America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere in the world. Even Germany which, from the sixteenth century on, has exhibited somewhat exaggerated sentiments of sovereign nationhood and a certain cultural and political nationalism, with the doctrinal fervour of Martin Luther and subsequently under

the influence of the Nazis, is spoken by Teutons, Celts and Saxons who take up other nationalities elsewhere in Europe. Indeed, what seems to have happened in Europe, from ancient times and throughout the medieval era, is that, once national boundaries have been created and consolidated by political and other forces, the national unit or country so defined finds subsequently in language the clearest and most obvious token of its identity. It is this manner of state or "nation" creation in Europe that appears to give credence to the notion expressed by Dr. Johnson that every language should properly function as the acknowledged expression of a distinctive nationality.

Secondly, even in Africa, and especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where languages tend generally to follow ethnic geography, unlike in Europe, as we have just been saying, ethnic groupings do not coincide with national or state boundaries. In fact, some of these ethnic groups and their languages, such as Hausa or Fulfulde are spoken over vast areas across international borders, while others, such as the minority languages, are too circumscribed to exist as viable national entities or countries. Furthermore, the distribution of languages is sometimes extremely complex, with many areas showing linguistic overlap and, at any one place, "layers" of language, each fulfilling a peculiar purpose. And so Dr. Johnson cannot be justified if he means that languages are the pedigree of states or countries. He must have used the word *nation* to refer to *ethnic nationality*.

And thirdly, although language can exercise an integrative function by bringing people together on the basis of their common linguistic and cultural affiliation, and in facilitating their capacity to think and act together as a group, it must be admitted that language is easily the most observable and the most readily ascertainable of all factors that not only divide mankind generally, but in particular threaten the economic and political stability of developing postcolonial states throughout sub-Saharan Africa, which, as we said earlier, are multilingual and multicultural countries *par excellence*. It is sometimes in order to avoid additional political problems that are engendered by endemic multilingualism in these states that each often adopt a foreign colonial language as their official national language. In

this situation, therefore, there is no way Dr. Johnson can be right if his words were to mean that languages are the pedigree of states, as he is frequently misquoted to say.

The point is that Dr. Johnson's statement reflected in 1775 the new significance attached to language by the middle of the eighteenth century, which enabled certain ethnic groups in various parts of the world, but particularly in Europe, to galvanize ethnic support for their political agenda by appealing stridently to their cultural and linguistic affiliation. The national language question, is not, therefore, a simple matter for sub-Saharan African states to deal with.

Nigeria and The National Language Question

It is, indeed, interesting, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, to see how Nigeria has handled this question in view of the fact that the country is an embodiment of the kinds of problems—economic, political and social, which are painfully created by multi-lingualism in all the states of the sub-region. For, whereas in Europe, America and Asia, the choice of a national language has been relatively easy to make, in Africa, it has been "a most difficult and delicate matter" (Bangbose 1975: 9).

Of course, in North Africa, diglossia has provided a solution in that classical Arabic is used as the high variety register for public administration, education and religion, and the local Arabic or some other language, such as Berber, serves as the low variety register for informal, private or domestic conversation. But in the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, the situation has been very different: for sociological, psychological, educational, political and economic reasons, the question of a national language has not been easy to answer.

Nigeria is typical of those countries of sub-Saharan Africa that are not only saddled with an official colonial language to which only a minority of the population have adequate access, but which also possess many rival ethnic languages from which it is generally considered to be politically inexpedient to choose one as a national language for use throughout the country. This situation is replicated in those other African countries, whether they were colonized by England, such as Ghana, Sierra Leone and Gambia in West Africa and Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania,

Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Malawi in East Africa or by France, such as Togo, Benin, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and Gabon or by Belgium, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi or even by Portugal, such as Angola and Mozambique.

In Nigeria, at independence in 1960, the burning question that agitated the minds of many people, especially politicians and politically-aware academics and journalists was: What language should newly independent Nigeria adopt as its national language? Newspapers published several comments and essays on the topic at the time, most of them opposed to the continuing use of the colonial language as the official language of the country. In particular, the *West African Pilot*, the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Times* all published articles calling for the selection of one indigenous speech form to serve as the national language.

But this was one of those tasks that were easier said than done. The crucial question was: Which language from such a wide range of about 400 languages that were found to be in use in the country? Indeed the debate was so acrimonious that it spilled over to the National Assembly where many people, including politicians, thought that the matter would be resolved, perhaps easily through legislation. They were in for a rude shock and a series of after-shocks.

The big shock was when the majority Hausa speakers from the territorially widespread Northern Nigeria thought, and they were not alone in thinking this way, that they could somehow impose Hausa on the rest of the country by their sheer numbers in the House. What they failed to reckon with was that in the matter of language imposition the game of numbers was a non-starter, as events in the House came to show. On November 21, 1961 Mallam A. Y. Balla, representing Adamawa North-West, moved on the floor of the House of Representatives the following motion:

That this House urges the Government, in consultation with the Regional Governments, to introduce the teaching of Hausa, Yoruba and 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.

He also wanted the transition period for conversion from English as the official language of parliament to a Nigerian language not to extend beyond twenty years.

This was a reasonable and balanced motion by all accounts. Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo were specifically mentioned, but no language was excluded, even if it was easy to surmise that Mallam Balla privately hoped that Hausa would eventually emerge as the winner. And it was this undeclared intention that non-Hausa sympathizers reacted to rather than the ostensibly fair wording of the motion. The debate that followed turned nasty. Indeed the unity of the country shook to its very foundations. And the *Daily Express* duly warned:

Parliament should be more careful about involving itself in the language tangle into which it is now being drawn. English is the accepted official language, the one outward expression of all that unites the various peoples in the country... To seek to replace English with some vernacular at a particular date-line is asking for more than the greatest nationalist of them all can handle.

As I commented elsewhere, the issue had become like a keg of gun-powder waiting to ignite. It was clear for everyone to see that this motion could not be pursued to its logical conclusion, not because it was not fair, but because non-Hausa speakers saw it as a ruse to impose a particular language on them. Therefore, while the Hausa-speaking North was in support of the motion, southerners opposed it.

But in reality, the matter was much more complex. It was not simply a question of replacing a foreign language with an indigenous one. The attitude of the two sides may also have had to do with the level of Western education and of familiarity with the English language in both parts of the country. There were apparently parliamentarians in the Northern House of Assembly who could only contribute to debates in Hausa but not in

English. It was not impossible that some members of the House of Representatives from the North had only limited access to English, and they would have seen this motion as an opportunity to enhance their contribution to debates on the floor of the House. On the other hand, their southern counterparts would probably have seen the same motion as giving to some of their northern colleagues an undue privilege which they themselves could not enjoy. They may have been thinking, further, that the northerners, with their majority in parliament, already had political advantage over them, and it was unwise to add linguistic hegemony to them. Worse, they may have perceived that the Hausa lobby threatened their own languages with eventual extinction. They therefore reacted, predictably, in anger. Chief Anthony Enahoro's contribution was typical of what the southerners were thinking:

...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?

Chief Enahoro's claim that his mother tongue, Edo, is older than Hausa and other Nigerian languages is obviously not true by any means, but his emotional reaction was entirely characteristic of language loyalty, to make exaggerated claims like this one on behalf of one's own speech community. The speech also reveals, as Allan (1978:398) comments, the profound fear that if a people are given linguistic hegemony, they will try to impose their customs and way of life on the rest of the nation. Indeed, Enahoro, at one point in the debate, actually said: "We have not

fought the imperialist in order to establish a new imperialism in this country”.

At the end of the debate, the motion by Mallam Balla was passed, thanks to the Hausa majority. But the tense political atmosphere had become so exacerbated as a result of the passage of the motion that the government decided to do nothing to implement it, effectively putting it in the cooler, especially as it saw that there was no point trying to reason with the combatants.

Language in the Constitution of 1979

In 1978, the Obasanjo military regime called a Constituent Assembly to fashion a new constitution for the country. Probably not oblivious of the controversy caused by the 1961 parliament-approved motion in favour of Hausa on the subject-matter, the Constituent Assemblymen decided that English should continue to play its role as the national language of the country. They obviously did not want to be accused of responsibility for causing the subterranean politically explosive rivalry between the three major languages to erupt to the surface.

But, in a broadcast on national television on September 21, 1978, the military Head of State, General Obasanjo, rejected the Constituent Assembly's submission and instead raised the three major indigenous languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, to the status of national languages along with English. The decision was to be inscribed in the constitution and to remain operative until such a time that the indigenous language could take the place of the foreign language. What he actually said was:

At this point in our development as a nation, it is unacceptable to make the English language the only language of business of our National Assembly and to proceed even further to enshrine it permanently in our Constitution.

The reason offered for doing this was national pride. But, as Amayo (1985:315) has pointed out the action meant that we then had, instead of just one official language. English, three

additional national languages, which, in Amayo's opinion, was not only impracticable in implementation, but also a retrograde measure that ironically installed English as the official language in Nigeria for all time.

While Amayo's criticism may be justified at one level, since, with the benefit of hindsight, English has indeed continued to enjoy that status as he predicted, it is perhaps, at another level, a superficial evaluation of the government action. Given the high and dangerous level of the inter-ethnic rivalry and mistrust which this issue had aroused, particularly among the three frontline contenders for the honour of being chosen as the national language, it was perhaps shrewd on the part of the regime to calm things down by making them all winners at the expense of the minority languages. And in all fairness, that is what the measure succeeded in doing. Except for the millions of Hausa speakers who may have thought that the prize was within their grasp, given time, the policy has not been seriously challenged by any highly-placed government official. On the contrary, the policy has frequently been held up to be in the best interest of national unity. Consequently, for a long time, we were bombarded with *wazobia* radio and television broadcasts, *wazobia* greetings on radio first thing in the morning and on television after the 9 o'clock evening news; compulsory *wazobia* in all federal secondary schools in all the states; and calls for *wazobia* teaching in Igbo and Yoruba states which presumably have more to gain than Hausa states from the application of this national prestige-sharing and therefore integrative policy.

What emerges most clearly from the posture taken by the Federal Government on this matter of language use in Nigeria is that national unity had become a preoccupation, and the indigenous languages plus English solution was no more than a mechanism for achieving that purpose.

(iii) *The National Language Policy*

On January 15, 1963, the first military coup led by Major Nzewgwu took place. It was followed six months later by another coup which enthroned Gowon as the new military Head of State. These military coups did nothing to stop the strong wind of independence blowing across the country. The idea of

indigenization began to gain ground. Following suggestions from the debate on the national language question, policy-makers started planning to indigenize education by introducing Nigerian languages and other items of Nigerian culture into the educational system. For it could be seen that Western education was causing alienation among adults and school children alike, and the damage needed to be stemmed.

In 1969, the Federal Military Government decided to organize a National Curriculum Conference. It was to examine, among other things, the role of the mother tongue in primary school education. The conference concluded that the Nigerian school child "should be well-grounded in the mother tongue" (Adaralegbe 1972:214).

Building on this, the government, in 1977, came out with a document titled *National Policy on Education* (NPE) in which it promised to make the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community the medium of instruction in the first few years of primary school (NTH. 1977:6). It is on this note that we turn now to the third and final plank of the linguistic situation in Nigeria, which is the national language policy of the Federal Government as contained in the *National Policy on Education*.

Now, it is commonly believed, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, that Nigeria does not have a national language policy. The research I carried out, which was published in 1988 as a Review of English and Literary Studies Monograph titled *Nigeria and the National Language Policy Question* shows that this view is inaccurate. It is true that we cannot put our finger on a single document that effectively encapsulates the various pronouncements of the Federal Government on language issues over the years. But it is equally true, as we shall see, that there exist a number of official documents that can be pieced together into what can be described as the Federal Government's National Language Policy. The focus is not, therefore, on whether or not Nigeria has a national language policy, but rather on aspects of this policy that appear to me to be ill-conceived and altogether badly implemented. Let us quickly review the major features of this policy in order to subsequently recommend modifications that

might suggest themselves to better achieve the goals for which the policy would appear to have been formulated. In doing this, I will concentrate on the medium of instruction in the educational system.

Instructional Medium in Education

With regard to this issue, the Federal Government's position is clearly set out in its publication entitled *Federal Republic of Nigeria, National Policy on Education* (1977). It prescribes "principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community" (pp. 6-8) as the medium of instruction at the nursery and lower primary classes, and English at the upper primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of education.

The government did not bother to explain why it had taken this position, but clearly it had been influenced by the argument that was prevalent at the time, that primary education was best begun in a child's mother tongue.

The government may have felt considerable satisfaction in adopting this policy. About a hundred years ago, in 1882 to be precise, the British colonial administration in Nigeria issued an Education Ordinance making the speaking, reading, and writing of English compulsory in all schools. The order was greeted by a strong wave of resentment throughout what was then called the Lagos Colony. The defunct *Lagos Times* fumed:

We shall not sit tamely to witness the murder, death, and burial of one of those important distinguishing national and racial marks (language) that God has given to us in common with other tribes, nations, and races, and not protest against it with all the energy that we can command. Such a system as that which we are expected to follow cannot: but produce in the minds of the common people eventually the deepest prejudice against their own native language and social habitudes. (Quoted from Masha)

Metcaife Sunter, first Inspector of School for British West Africa, brushed these sentiments aside with absolute scorn:

The natives must and will know English in spite of all such well-meaning but diseased notions: it is the language of commerce and the only education worth a moment's consideration or attainable

I regard these said languages as only interesting to the comparative philologist and never likely to become of any practical use in civilization, at least as far as British interests are ever likely to be concerned (Quoted from Abiri 1976:7).

Evidently blinded by his own prejudices, Sunter could see no good in any other language but his own. The British administration, therefore, maintained this posture even in the face of the opposition mounted not only by the "natives" but also by white missionaries who wanted to get their Christian message across in the language the people used.

But by the turn of the century, new currents of ideas began to flow from America into Africa with which that country was making contacts. In 1920, an American philanthropic organization set up a commission to study education in Africa. The commission, known as the Phelps-Stoke Commission, reported in 1922. It recommended, among other things, the use of the "tribal language" in the lower primary classes and "the language of the European nation in control" in the upper classes (Iwara 1981: 96-98).

It was a clever compromise that seemed to satisfy the legitimate aspirations of the "tribal" people without jeopardizing the position of elegant eminence which English had by now acquired. The Advisory Committee appointed by the Secretary of State for the colonies therefore seized upon it. In a series of reports (in 1925, 1927, 1935 and 1943), it now emphasized the importance of the use of the mother tongue in the lower primary education, but always took care to carve out a special role for English in both upper primary and post-primary education.

The idea of beginning primary education in the mother tongue further received strong support when education and language specialists met in 1951 under the sponsorship of

UNESCO. Their report, published in 1953, recommended that pupils should begin their schooling through the medium of the mother tongue and that this practice should be extended to as late a stage in the education system as possible. It asserted:

It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue. Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in the mind work automatically for expression and understanding; sociologically, it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium (UNESCO 1953:11).

Subsequent meetings of UNESCO experts re-affirmed this point of view. The UNESCO conference on "The Use in Education of African Languages in relation to English," for example, arrived at the conclusion that "ideally, the medium of instruction for a child living in its own language environment should be the mother tongue" (Bangbose 1976:11). The UNESCO advisory group of consultants on "The Role of Linguistics and Sociolinguistics in language Education and Policy", at the end of their meeting of 28 February 1972, went even further along this road. It asserted that "teaching at least initial literacy in the mother tongue may be advisable even in situations where the scanty number of speakers appears not to warrant the large-scale production of educational materials" (UNESCO 1972:11).

These ideas became so popular that they formed the object of several experiments. One of the best-known, the Iloilo Experiment, produced results that appeared to conclusively demonstrate the superiority of starting off the child's education with the mother tongue. It showed that the local language, Hiligaynon, was a much more effective medium of instruction in the first two primary grades than English, and that even when the language of instruction changed to English in the third year, the superiority of the vernacular medium of instruction remained—in that the experimental group continued to surpass the control group. Another experiment in Ghana showed that

primary school children had a higher vocabulary in their mother tongue than in English, which implied that, for them, English would be a less efficient medium of instruction than their mother tongue (Bamgbose 1976:12; Dakin 1968:28).

Not long after independence, the Nigerian government, exercising its full rights of sovereignty and perhaps not forgetful of Sunter, took over these ideas with reckless abandon. The Nigerian National Curriculum Conference organized in 1969, concluded that the Nigerian primary school child “should be well-grounded in his mother tongue” (Adaralegbe 1972:214).

That same year, it embarked on a gigantic project in collaboration with Ford Foundation—the Six-Year Primary Project, which involved the use of Yoruba as the medium of instruction for the full six years of primary education, with English taught as a subject or a second language by specialist teachers (cf. Afolayan in Bamgbose 1976: 113-134). Typically, the enthusiasm with which the experiment was begun flagged halfway through and the lofty objectives of the project have now faded into oblivion.

In adopting this language policy, the government acted as if there was no contrary point of view. As we said earlier it did not feel it had to give reasons for its position. It did not give the impression either that it would encounter difficulties, financial and otherwise, in executing the policy. On the contrary, it pledged to “develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages and produce textbooks in them” (N.P.E. 1977:6), as if this was going to be a simple task. The government actually said (emphasis mine):

Government will ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community (in the case of the pre-primary education); and Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community, and at a later stage, English (in the case of the primary and post-primary education).

When we contrast the emphatic language in which the policy is couched with the dismal performance of the government in ensuring a uniform execution of the policy, the basic weakness of the policy becomes self-evident. The government is not and will never be in a position to “ensure” or to “see to it” that pre-primary and lower primary children in the over 400 language communities all over the country receive instruction in their mother tongue. The task of devising an orthography and producing literacy materials, particularly for the minority languages, has always been a community effort. The most the Federal Government can do in this respect is, first, to encourage each language community to promote its own language and, secondly, to prompt each local government authority to give support in cash and in kind to each language community for its work in this area. Special assistance may have to be offered to local governments where the multiplicity of languages constitutes a particular problem. What is, therefore, defective in this aspect of the national language policy is that it places the burden of responsibility for implementation on the Federal Government, which cannot bear it. The fact of the matter is that the Federal Government has not reduced one single language to writing since it announced this policy, nor has it undertaken to produce a textbook in any of the minority languages such as Igala and Lokaa, which have recently managed to produce their own orthographies through community effort. This is not to deny the tremendous encouragement that the National Language Centre has given to the smaller language communities by its publication of the orthography series.

The policy talks about the language of instruction in the primary school being “initially” the mother tongue. The word *initially* lends itself to a variety of interpretations, which may be at least partially responsible for the haphazard and half-hearted implementation of the policy. In some cases, Bamgbose (1976:10) informs us, the mother tongue is used “for the first two, three or even four to five years of primary education”. He adds that in other areas where several smaller languages are spoken, the mother tongue is replaced by a more widely spoken language or by English. This fluctuation is all very confusing. What we need here is a specific and explicit policy statement

like the Ghanaian one of 1968. In that year, a Government White Paper stated that official policy was that a Ghanaian language should be used in the first year, and that a gradual change to English as the medium of instruction should begin in the second year. We agree entirely with Bamgbose (1976:17-18) that where there is excessive fluctuation in policy application, vagueness or indecision concerning fundamental aspect of policy (e.g. whether the mother tongue is to be used and, if so, at what level), serious problems could arise leading to lack of uniformity, frustration on the part of the teachers, lack of direction, confusion on the part of the pupils, and inconsistencies between policy and practice.

Our final query, and perhaps the most important, on this aspect of the Federal Government's national language policy has to do with the principle of teaching primary school pupils in their mother tongue for only a few years and then changing over to English for the remaining period of their formal education. In discussing the philosophy of Nigerian education, the Federal Government (N.P.E. 1977:5) declared that it appreciated the importance of language in the educational process and that it saw the use of indigenous languages in education "as a means of preserving the people's culture". It is conceivable that the government would want the children to attain literacy, and possibly permanent literacy, in both their mother tongue and English. But it is very difficult to see how these objectives can be achieved in the small number of years and in the erratic manner in which the programme of mother tongue education is being pursued. It would indeed appear that the government is merely paying lip-service to an idea, the significance of which it has not fully grasped, and which it considers impracticable and uneconomical to follow through to its logical conclusion.

There is, furthermore, a lingering suspicion that the government has not completely freed itself from the cloak of doubt and prejudice that the colonial administration had thrown upon the minds of educated Nigerians about the validity of mother-tongue education. There is no doubt that a feeling of inferiority complex is here at work. Otherwise, why would culture-conscious university teachers who are aware of the pedagogical, psychological, and sociological advantages of mother-tongue education not want their children to go through

their primary school career receiving instruction in and through their mother tongue or the language of the immediate community? Or are they skeptical about the innate superiority of mother tongue education over the existing English-based and English-oriented educational system? One would have expected them to do better than the Yoruba parents who, like village farmer-parents everywhere in Nigeria, as Layeni (1970:17) discovered, believed that "to be truly educated one must be literate in English, French, or any other modern European language, even on the pain of learning such a language by rote. To them Yoruba as a language is of no economic and educational value".

It is true that the superiority of mother-tongue education, in Dakin's words (1968:27), "has not been everywhere demonstrated" and one has only to recall the results of the Iganga experiment in Uganda which showed that a class which was taught Geography in English performed better than the one that received the same lesson in the mother tongue (Wingard 1966:95-115). Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that we are here dealing with an enormous problem of colonial mentality which alienates many Nigerians. For them, it would be hard, very hard indeed, to abandon their assimilated preference for the straight-for-English system in favour of an education process employing a Nigerian language as its instructional vehicle and basing its content on the traditional and local needs of the community it is intended to serve. The elite who are the authors of the national language policy may indeed be carriers or victims of this colonial virus. For how else can one explain the preponderance which they give to English in our educational set-up? These are the people who are content to see Nigerian and African languages play second fiddle to the so-called languages of wider communication and to recite with glee Pio Zirimu's "catechetical litany" which runs as follows:

English and French are international languages, the languages of science and technology, of commerce and industry, of higher education and universal culture—in short, the languages of education, development and international communication. Moreover, these languages being foreign and

therefore neutral, and being institutionalized through formal educational will unite us. Native languages cannot claim to perform the same functions, and must therefore take second place, and be used in those areas where we cannot do better for the time being.

One cannot deny that there are benefits to be derived from knowing those world languages. Jacobs (1966:40) reported that when he interviewed Nigerians from all walks of life in order to assess the importance of English language to the present and future development of the country, "the great majority of interviewees considered English to be an essential medium of communication without which Nigeria could neither possess the uniformity of resources and talent needed for development nor foster the social, business and scientific changes that constitute development". But are these sufficient reasons to abandon our own languages, to sit tamely by, in the words of the Lagos Times, to witness the murder, death and burial of one of our most important features of cultural heritage? Do these reasons justify our attitude, when some of us can speak, read and write the English language better than the Englishman but can hardly speak our own languages fluently, let alone read and write them? Pandit Nehru, speaking of the Indian linguistic situation which was quite similar to Nigeria's today, makes our point in his customary magisterial manner, and we quote:

English was a foreign language. We were greatly handicapped by having it as a 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 from Allan 1978:406).

It is for these reasons that we think that the national language policy is defective in failing to prescribe the mother tongue as the medium of instruction beyond the first few years of primary education. In order to have any impact whatsoever on the education of the child in terms both of his cultural identity and of his acquisition of permanent literacy in his mother tongue or the language of his immediate community, education in these indigenous languages must be carried out with conviction and dedication through the full six primary years at the very least.

If this modification is adopted and the principle of linguistic self-determination inherent in the national language policy is maintained, a principle to which I subscribe wholeheartedly, it could be objected, as Bull (1964:529) has done, that the cost of such an enterprise would be prohibitive in an excessively polyglot society like Nigeria. He, therefore, suggests that in place of "more education in more vernaculars, it would seem more practical to formulate a long-range educational programme aimed at a gradual reduction in the number of languages and dialects . . ." (*ibid.*).

This is an appealing rational argument. It is true, as Bamgbose (1976:14) has pointed out, that the existence of several languages with only a small number of speakers is bound to pose certain problems with respect to availability of education materials, teachers and even orthographies. And there are many instances where political, religious, economic and other considerations have conditioned speakers of smaller languages to accept willingly to receive their education, not in their mother tongue, but in the language of their more powerful neighbour. This is the case in some parts of Northern Nigeria where Hausa is used as the medium of instruction by non-native speakers of the language.

But for me, it is profoundly distasteful, indeed unacceptable, to wish to condemn permanently any group of speakers, however small their number may be, to a kind of intellectual colonialism. This may sound idealistic, but it only takes one to be a potential victim of this economic argument to resist forcefully the counsel of acquiescence, despair and virtual cultural suicide that it implies.

Moreover, there is incontrovertible evidence to show that the technical problems and expenditures involved in using small languages in literacy and primary education are not nearly as formidable as they are often made out to be. The evidence is the Rivers Readers Project. Administered from our own Institute of African Studies right from its inception in 1970, it demonstrates the viability of small-language projects under prudent management and direction, such as we have seen from Professor Kay Williamson who has herself given a beautiful account of it (cf Bamgbose 1976: 135-153). The project is designed to provide literacy and initial primary education in the mother tongue of over twenty small languages and dialects of the Rivers State. Groups of interested scholars and teachers from the various language communities work as a team supported by inexpensive standard primers. The economic argument is not, therefore, such an immovable rock against which primary education in limited usage languages must inevitably founder. I have myself worked with the Yakurr community to produce reading materials at very low cost.

An Analysis of the Three Linguistic Issues

Tying together all these three strands of linguistic issues in Nigeria, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, a picture emerges, a picture that gives us the sociolinguistic status of the three categories of languages spoken in Nigeria, a picture that is also extremely relevant for the position we are going to take in the second part of the lecture. The three languages categories are:

1. The non-major/minority indigenous languages
2. The major indigenous languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba
3. The English language

The Non-Major/Minority Indigenous Languages

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, there are about 397 or so languages in this category, which may be further divided, on the basis of their native speaker population, into two sub-categories: major minority languages and minor minority languages.

The major minority languages are about twelve in number: Fulfulde (or Fulani), Kanuri, Tiv, Nupe, Jukun, Epira, Edo, Ibibio, Idoma, Ijo, Efik, and Urhobo. They count sizeable populations of native speakers of between two and eight million and enjoy the status of an official language at the state level. Like the major languages, they have a standardized orthography and a fairly large body of literature, but their literary corpus is usually much less than that of the three major languages.

The minor minority languages, which number about 385, are languages with native speakers under two million. A few of these languages have speakers around half a million. Some even have a well-developed orthography and a literary corpus. Such languages are usually also accorded recognition at the state level and are used as a medium for news and other programmes on radio and television. Two good examples are Ejagham and Bekwarra, which are used in the Cross River State along with a major minority language, Efik, for news broadcasts and in the lower primary educational system. But some of the others do indeed sometimes have a very small population of speakers and no orthography. Asigha, for instance, is a language that is only spoken in a single village in the Yakurr LGA of the Cross River State and counts only a few thousand speakers.

What is worth noting about this category of languages is that, although the individual languages are small by themselves, however, put together, they constitute about half of the population of the country, which should give them quite a say in the way the country is run and, in particular, how the language policy of the country is determined and implemented. This group of languages is not yet conscious of its combined power and influence.

It is also interesting, for instance, to note that these minority languages accepted without a protest the 1978 decision of the Federal Military Government to give constitutional recognition to the three major languages only. Many people estimated that it was a good decision, based on the superiority of these languages, not only in terms of their numbers but also in consideration of the level of standardization and modernization of these languages. But it is also possible that they acquiesced in the face of the decision because of their lack of unity, since

these languages are widely scattered throughout the country. And finally, they may have remained silent because they were suffering from a minority syndrome which makes them feel inferior in many ways, politically, intellectually, economically and educationally, to the speakers of the major languages whom they have seen continually grabbing the lion's share of the national cake, evidenced by the total lack of development in their areas and the non-appointment of their people to important positions in the Federal Government. What I am suggesting is that there is a link between the low esteem in which these minority populations hold their language and their culture and their low expectation to achieve. The clearest evidence of this is in the Hausa-dominated parts of Northern Nigeria, where local communities have such a low opinion of their languages and cultures vis-a-vis Hausa that they believe that they cannot pray to Allah in their own indigenous languages because these languages do not qualify to be the language of religion and to be used to address Allah.

The consequence is that they refrain from speaking their native languages, which has led to serious language and culture endangerment in that part of the country. The situation some years ago was so bad in some places in Bauchi State, such as Balewa, that violent riots erupted in 1991 and again two or three years after as a result of enlightened youngsters trying to reverse the trend and to preserve their language and their culture. Edo almost suffered the same fate when it was under Yoruba political domination before 1963, so that many Edo speakers of the older generation also speak Yoruba almost as well as their first language. That situation came to an end when Edo people were excised from the Yoruba-dominated Western Region of Nigeria. Ibibio is another language that suffered for a long time under the domination of Efik in south eastern Nigeria: it survived when an association of Ibibio speakers got together to assert their independence and to project their own language and culture.

In 1992, I carried out some research to ascertain the attitude of non-major language speakers towards the idea of promoting one of their own to the status of a national language for Nigeria. The research was published in *JOLAN*, the Journal of the

Linguistic Association of Nigeria, vol. 6, under the title "One Nigeria One Language for National Integration: What the People Say". Most of the respondents rejected the offer on the basis that it would never happen. Most of the respondents also vehemently rejected the imposition of a major indigenous language on them. Parents of children of secondary school age were not supportive of their children learning one of the major national languages. But they were ready to do anything for their children to perform well in English, and to demonstrate their competence and performance both at school and at home.

The Major Indigenous Languages: Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, the second category of languages spoken in Nigeria comprises the three major indigenous languages: Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo. Native speakers of these languages make up, between them, about half of the population of the country. A large number of the non-Hausa people, including those of Fulani origin, in the northern part of the country also speak Hausa as a first or second language. During the colonial period, English was, of course, the official language of the government, although Hausa was extensively used in government correspondence and the activities of the Northern Protectorate. At Independence in 1960, the Constitution retained English as the language of administration. But there was much talk of replacing the foreign language with an indigenous one. In fact, as earlier stated, after an acrimonious debate in the first session of the federal parliament, a motion was carried in 1961 that made Hausa the national language of the country, but with effect from 1981, that is, after a learning period of twenty years, during which English was to continue to function as the official language of the country.

The immediate impact of this motion was to promote intense rivalry among the three major languages. Government turned a blind eye to the bitterness of the rivalry and simply continued to broadcast news in them on the national radio and television, although broadcasts in Hausa became, quite more frequent than either Yoruba or Igbo. The observed higher profile of Hausa instigated the other two rivals to intensify their efforts to gain national recognition. Yoruba news broadcasts and programmes,

under the guise of promoting local culture, became more frequent in the Yoruba-dominated Western Region, while Igbo did likewise in the East. Yoruba and Igbo newspapers were established in their various areas of influence. But it was Hausa that went all out to try to keep the trophy it seemed to have won, especially as it appeared to have good reasons for success in its ambition.

Firstly, Hausa saw itself as an international language, spoken right across West Africa and used for broadcasts on the prestigious BBC and VOA to reach its speakers in the sub-region.

Secondly, Hausa esteemed itself on the possession of a vast and growing literature. The Arewa Publishing House was established by the Northern Regional Government to bolster the effort to make this point. And indeed many publications in Hausa were turned out with the financial backing of the government of Northern Nigeria. An academy-like panel of scholars was even set up to enlarge the lexicon of the language in as many new areas of knowledge as possible, particularly in the sciences, technology and politics.

Thirdly, from 1966 onwards, all the military regimes of the country were Hausa-dominated. In fact, it was an open secret at the time that Hausa was practically the language of the national army that was used, even if unofficially, as one of the criteria for promotion. In any case, it was, and still is, the lingua franca in army barracks everywhere in the country, in the North as in the South.

This subterranean, but politically explosive rivalry was brought to an abrupt end in 1978 when General Obasanjo, a Yoruba, took advantage of his position as the military Head of State to promote all the three major languages to the status of 'national languages' and enshrined that decision in the new constitution of the country. It was a clever move that killed off the individual ambition of the three languages by appearing to give support to all of them together against the dominance of their foreign rival. Furthermore, from that date, they were made to believe that they were being empowered to become languages of official communication in the National Assembly as well as other public domains.

The ploy worked like magic. The three major rivals stopped fighting. Their bitterness towards one another subsided. Together they took comfort in the fact that the Linguistic Association of Nigeria (LAN) was being contracted to produce a national typewriter with a font to take care of their alphabets. I was a member of the committee appointed by the National Language Centre to study the problem. We set to work under the momentum, only to discover subsequently that the government either was not serious or had a change of heart, because the project was soon starved of funding, abandoned and allowed to die a natural death. The relative peace Nigeria enjoys today on the national language issue must, however, be attributed to the architects of that 1978 decision, which, in order to obtain unity and cooperation of the three giants, presented the English language as their common public enemy. It is worthy of note that the political decision taken then to give equal prominence to the three languages is today maintained by the Federal Government. The rumour that was doing the rounds sometime ago that government was plotting to demote Igbo from this exalted group has vanished. And it may not be a coincidence that, recently the government announced the award of a contract to translate the Constitution into the three languages as a step in the direction of facilitating their use in the National Assembly.

But is this a genuine revival of interest in the development of the three languages? I have my doubts. For one thing, the contracts were awarded to individuals instead of language institutions like the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) and LAN, which should have been empowered by law to do the job in a professional manner.

For another, it is pretty unlikely that the members of the National Assembly from these major language areas would ever want to address their colleagues from other language areas in their own mother tongue as long as English remained the prestige language of the country. After all, one important criterion of eligibility for election is not competence in one's mother tongue but demonstrated good performance in the use of English.

And finally, the translation of the Constitution would appear to be an exercise in futility insofar as it was not

predicated on any clear objective to be achieved, considering that the status of the present 1999 Constitution is uncertain, with the on-going review by the Constitution Review Committee of the Senate.

For me, therefore, the best gloss that can be put on the whole exercise is that it offers temporary employment for some individual translators, but at what expense? It is not possible, in my view, that the Ministry of Information and National Orientation, which is sponsoring the assignment, is, like a masquerade, dancing in the gallery. The truth of the matter is that Hausa, Yoruba or Igbo National Assembly members, like their counterparts from other language areas, are likely to be far more literate and versatile in English than they are ever likely to be in their own mother tongue. This means that they would most probably prefer to read the Constitution in English than in their indigenous language version, unless they were curious philologists interested in comparing the two versions, for academic reasons.

The English Language or the Language of Prestige

Among the languages spoken in Nigeria, English belongs to a class of its own. Imported from Britain, and suitably modified from time to time through the process of adaptation since its arrival in Nigeria, its dominance in government business in the country from colonial times, and particularly from the 1950's to the present, is an incontrovertible fact. Indeed, in some ways, its dominance has intensified in recent years with the increasing impact of globalization. The prestige that English already enjoyed as the language of the colonial master race has become even more overwhelming since independence as the language acquired other roles, such as the passport for economic, political and social success as well as the yardstick for measuring the quality of one's education and the basis for comparison with the civilized world. It is indicative of the linguistic state of affairs in the country that the research I carried out some fifteen years ago (cf. Iwara 1992) showed that Nigerians preferred learning English to learning any Nigerian language, even when the language was that of the dominant neighbour. Indeed, it is increasingly not uncommon to find that middle class children

are more fluent in English than in their mother tongue, to the delight and pride of their parents. As a result of this predilection, the policy put in place by the federal government to encourage secondary school students to learn at least one indigenous language other than their own in the interest of national integration is in shambles, because such an exercise is generally considered more or less futile compared to the advantages accruing from learning English. Many schools have, therefore, either abandoned the policy or implemented it without conviction or enthusiasm.

Many people will, no doubt, argue that Nigeria needs English to operate in the modern world. After all Tanzania, several years ago under President Nyerere's policy of self-reliance, tried to do without it and was forced to admit failure and reverse his Swahili programme. English is the dominant language in the world today. It is the language of technology and international trade. And it has such a pool of knowledge and literature that a country, especially from Black Africa, ignoring it does so at its own peril in terms of growth, particularly in these days of globalization.

But it is my view that Nigeria is also paying a high price for allowing the English language to occupy such a dominant position. The most serious damage is in the suppression of the self-confidence of Nigerians, in the undermining of their belief in the inherent value of their languages and cultures. There are, indeed, many Nigerians who still believe that English is a superior language to any of the Nigerian languages, and indeed all the Nigerian languages put together. Such people usually also hold the view that the Englishman is a superior human being to his Nigerian counterpart, if not a kind of god. How often have we heard elderly people, who had lived through the colonial period, express the view, especially in times of national crisis, that the British should return to rule Nigeria again, as a litany of the blessings of the "golden era" of the British colonial administration continues to ring in their ears?

This damaging inferiority complex manifests itself in so many ways. In the domain of education, English is the preferred medium of instruction, even when it is generally known that people learn better in the language in which they possess the

greatest competence. In the dispensation of justice, English is the language of the lawyers and the judges, even when they know that justice would be better served if communication was carried out in the local language of the litigants. In the political arena, government decisions, usually formulated at the level of senior management, are given to officers of lower ranks for execution even when it is obvious that these executive officers lack the capacity to fully understand these decisions they are expected to execute, with the result that beautiful projects on paper are not realized on ground because of the gap in communication between the anglicized top government decision-makers and their 'less educated' local executive officers who are mesmerized by the over-ripe vowels in the speech habit of their bosses. We have to remember that the people who can legitimately claim to have easy access to English in Nigeria are only a mere 15% or so of the population. It is indeed ridiculous, therefore, for a country like Nigeria to decide to function in a foreign language in which the vast majority of its people are severely excluded. From this perspective alone, the existing communicative disconnect between top government officials and the generality of the populace, apart from other related problems, such as the slow pace or lack of planned genuine development in the country, should not come as a surprise. We should also remember that access to English, not accessibility to the people, is a critical requirement for seeking elective office at all the levels of government.

Furthermore, the entire concept of modern government, embracing democracy and public accountability, gives the impression that these are foreign principles of public administration. There is bound to be confusion and misapprehension in their minds when people who are not familiar with the language are put in a position to put the concepts into effect. Only the wildest optimist would expect other results other than what is currently on offer in Nigeria. The mental disposition of the vast majority of Nigerians, patterned after their languages, cultures and experiences, is so far removed from that of the English colonialists that it is not going to be easy to bridge the gap. It cannot happen overnight. Time is also

of the essence in that any attempt to convert people from one way of doing things to another is bound to take time and patience. Unfortunately, in the way things are done in Nigeria, time and perseverance are in constant short supply. And to me that is the crux of the problem. It is not an easy proposition to change a whole people's mentality. Projects of this nature take, not only a lot of time and patience, but also money and planning, as we shall see shortly from the proposals we are putting forward for a resolution of the problem of development in the country.

Language in the Thinking Process and Development

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, let us now turn our attention to the second part of this lecture, which has to do with the role of language in the thinking process and *ipso facto* in the development paradigm.

In dealing with this matter, I believe it is important to determine exactly what we mean by development. While I was looking around for material on development, I stumbled upon a book with the title *Sustainable Development*. I was excited because I thought I had struck gold. But as I turned the pages, I discovered, to my surprise, that it was talking about the endangerment of the ecosystem and the depletion of the ozone layer by the uncontrolled emission of green house gases and the burning of toxic wastes in our environment. It would appear, therefore, reasonable to say a word or two about the kind of development we are here concerned with.

First, I would like to make a distinction between development and growth. I know that, generally, when people talk of "national development", the reference is to increases in the gross national product (GNP) and economic growth. And it cannot be denied that some growth is being registered annually in many areas of our economic activity. For instance, more roads are being constructed all over the country. More towns and cities are being connected to the national grid. More hospitals are being provided for the people. More food is being grown everywhere in the country. And this expansion of economic activity is described as "national development". For me, it is merely economic growth. For Nigeria to develop, it must plan its

growth; for it to plan, it must think properly; for it to think properly for sustainable development, it must be in full possession of a medium for thinking, which is language. In what language are the majority of Nigerians thinking and planning for development? Is it in English to which less than 20% of the population have adequate access? Or is it in the indigenous languages which are obviously not equipped and modernized sufficiently to cope with current development thinking in this age of globalization? Looked at from this perspective, it is hardly surprising that no single development project can be said to have been conceived and implemented successfully, that is, in a sustainable manner in the history of this country. Is it NEPA? Is it the Nigerian Railway Corporation? Is it the Ajaokuta Steel Industry? Is it the construction of roads and the road transportation system? Is it the various 'operations' in agriculture, the Green Revolution or Operation Feed the Nation? Is it even the GSM? My hypothesis is that Nigeria can register some growth, but it will not develop in a sustainable manner unless it is provided with the language it can competently manipulate for effective thinking and planning. Nigeria will not move the earth unless, and until, it has a place to stand, as the Latin axiom *Da mihi locum stare et terram movebo* aptly says.

As far as the linkage between language and thinking is concerned, the questions we are interested in are the following: Can thinking take place without language? How do we know that language and thinking are inexorably connected? Answers to these questions are important for all human beings for whom thinking is an essential part of life itself.

Of course, it is not impossible to think without using words, as when one thinks in images, models, diagrams or gestures employing the deaf and dumb alphabet or some other muscular movement. But this is the exception, rather than the rule. In most cases, words are involved in thinking; in fact, the normal mechanism for purposeful and well ordered thought or conceptual cognition utilizes words (or language).

One strong reason for linking language with thinking is that when we observe a dislocation or a disconnection between language and logical thinking in the linguistic behaviour of an individual, we immediately say that the person is mad. We know

when there is a dislocation between language and thinking because language is cultural behaviour and, as such, each language strictly follows a specific accepted structural pattern for logical thinking and the expression of a particular thought or idea in the culture.

Another reason is that thinking uses knowledge as its springboard. Knowledge comes in all sorts of ways, but its principal channel is names in various forms—nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, to mention only these obvious categories. It is these names that we use for categorizing our environment in the thought process.

A third reason is that thinking derives from experience, which is linguistically structured before storage in the memory. Experience comes in various forms, but its main vehicle is words which come with their cultural baggage. For example, in Nigeria it is taken that the “pure water” on sale in our streets is not necessarily pure. So the word “pure” in the Nigerian context does not necessarily mean pure, although this is the meaning it carries in the English lexicon. Furthermore, experience and thinking are formulated in sentence patterns, which are language dependent since one cannot think except in the sentence structure of the language one is thinking in. What all this boils down to is that linguistic mapping is vital in the thinking process in that it prescribes the linguistic context, the background referential structure of whatever idea the individual wants to express. Examine, for instance, the following sentences in Nigerian English:

1. The *amala* is hard.
2. The water is hard.
3. The woman is hard.
4. The sum is hard.

Obviously, the word “hard” has different denotations and connotations in the different contexts. This means that for the speaker’s thinking to be understood, the hearer must know the contextual or linguistic status of the speaker, that is, his background network of symbolic system.

To answer the particular question as to whether we can express our thoughts without language, we might need to ask ourselves; first, what thought is. This is a difficult question. Whatever it may be, it certainly covers a number of different types of mental activity. First, it involves remembering, which in turn involves the memory where words, concepts, propositions and inferences are stored. Now this is not the time or place to go into the controversy surrounding concept theory, the criteria feature theory of necessary and sufficient features versus prototype theory. But what is certain is that thought involves choosing words and propositions to convey concepts and inferences, which implies that the concepts are general categories in terms of which propositions are formulated; and experience is processed as old knowledge or as a new idea which subsequently becomes knowledge and is stored in the memory.

As for the linkage between language and thought expression, our position is that most simple thoughts, and especially emotions, can be expressed by non-verbal communication. But complicated thoughts can only be expressed by means of conventional oral or written speech. There is no way you can say, "My father is ninety years old" except through verbal means, although you can more or less adequately express the idea of old age without words. To say, "I am old but wise" or "I am old but silly", you need words, oral or written; in other words you need human language.

Sapir-Whorf Relativity Hypothesis

In talking about language and communication, thinking and the expression of ideas, it seems natural to go on to discuss the linguistic relativity hypothesis espoused by Sapir and Whorf and others about the middle of the last century, since it explores the relationship between language, thought and reality.

The double-barreled term, "Sapir-Whorf", was invented by J.B. Carroll in his introduction to the book *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, which he edited. The term was meant to designate a school of thought whose main hypothesis was that language shaped our cognitive structure and therefore considerably influenced our perception

of reality. Carroll knew that Whorf was the acclaimed proponent of the idea, but the coinage included Sapir because it was Sapir who, indeed, first propounded the hypothesis, and Whorf was only a brilliant disciple of Sapir's.

But the idea occurred to Sapir late in his career. In fact, by 1921 he was canvassing another view, namely, that the differences between languages were merely in their modes of expressing a common range of experiences, rather than corresponding to differences in the experiences themselves (1921: 218).

However, later, in 1929, Sapir changed his idea. He now believed that the world a man inhabited was a linguistic construct. In his own words (1929:209):

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.

Two years later, he adds that:

Language . . . not only refers to experience largely acquired without its help, but actually defines experience for us by reason of its formal completeness and because of our unconscious projection of its implicit expectations into the field

of experience Such categories as number, gender, case, tense, . . . are not so much discovered in experience as imposed upon it because of the tyrannical hold that linguistic form has upon our orientation in the world.

And Whorf supported these strong statements by saying that:

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language. We ascribe significance as we do largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way, an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the pattern of our language. The agreement is unstated, but its terms are absolutely obligatory... .

By the time a child is six, the phoneme pattern has become ingrained and automatic. No sequence of sounds that deviates can even be articulated without difficulty.

The fact of the matter is that both Sapir and Whorf were emphatic about the predominant role of language in the perception of reality and the expression of it. In the end, they believed that human beings were total slaves of language and that there was nothing we could think or say without its absolute controlling influence. Whorf even believed language exercised its stranglehold on us as early as at six years old.

I have reflected deeply on this hypothesis. One cannot but see that it seems to suffer from certain weaknesses in the arguments of its proponents. Firstly, there are aspects of culture which, although pervaded by language, are independent of it. Indeed, there are some primary symbols of culture which are not dependent on language. Examples are art, dance, miming, ritual and religious practices, etc. it is clear that culture is more extensive than language, or, put in another way, there is more in culture than in language, so that it would appear that culture exerts more pressure on language than the other way round. In

the end, both culture and language appear to be equally regulated by the standard common conventions of each society.

Secondly, a simple exposure to speech will not shape a person's mind, since one's linguistic responses may be patterned according to one's long established community reactions. What seems evident is that the acculturated individual is motivated to learn the language of a community to the degree that he uses its structure as a guide to reality, and language can then assume a formative role. But it does not mean that language precedes and dominates the culture in which the language is only a part.

On the other hand, there are some powerful arguments in favour of this thesis of linguistic determinism. Firstly, language is necessary for the expression of certain ideas, especially complex ideas. Ideas come from experience and experience is drawn from the memory where it is stored in the form of words and their syntactic and paradigmatic structures.

Secondly, there is no aspect of culture which is not pervaded by language. Indeed, language is the primary vehicle of culture. Culture is what distinguishes us from animals and between different groups of people. In the final analysis, language is a basic cultural behaviour.

It is not difficult therefore to see how the perception of reality can be influenced by language. Language predisposes us to modes of thought for which there are words and their connotations and grammatical structures. Competence and performance are, of course, of the essence in this matter, but the thesis takes for granted maximality in both spheres.

So whatever position one eventually takes in this matter, there is no doubt that there is a correlation between language, thought expression and experience, so that even if language is not the controlling force in all human experience as the Whorfian hypothesis makes it, the unique features of language are nonetheless an important participant in the thought process and in the expression of thought and experience, and consequently in the development paradigm.

Conclusion

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, it is time to begin to conclude.

Given the linguistic situation in Nigeria which we have just described and the lack of achievement of our development goals, it is evident that the *status quo* cannot be allowed to continue unchecked. Some solution must be provided to change the persistent pattern of unsatisfactory performance of the country in its development effort. If genuine development cannot happen without careful planning and thinking, and if the complex thinking process needed for development cannot take place without the involvement of language, then the key to sustainable development lies in the provision of a linguistic environment in which the majority of Nigerians can do their thinking together for development. That environment is bilingual education in English and an available indigenous language preferably up to the university level.

The major facts presented in this lecture are the following. First, it was noted that Nigeria is a country with 400 languages, the highest number of languages ever recorded by a single state anywhere in the world. Its complex linguistic diversity was presented as posing a dangerous threat to its continued existence as a political entity, a threat that was initially intensified by the potentially explosive rivalry among the three major languages each seeking to become the national language. To counter this danger, a decision was taken to promote a foreign colonial language, English, to the status of the national language.

This single act, which was apparently taken in the national interest, had two disastrous consequences.

First, the colonial language, now raised to a position of prestige, was seen as insidiously undermining the indigenous languages and cultures and threatening them with extinction. The majority of the citizens became alienated from the business of government by the imposition of a foreign language to which they had very limited access. Those who could not speak the language of the elite automatically felt a deep sense of inferiority complex that interfered with their innate capacity to achieve.

Secondly, the decision threw into disarray the government policy to introduce primary education to children in their own language or the language of the immediate community. Both the middle class elite in the city and the farmers in rural communities equally clamoured for education through the English medium. They could see the political, economic, psychological and educational advantages accruing from acquiring this language. The result was that those who could not afford expensive private schools where English was more or less well taught had to make do with quack schools making the same claims as the good ones. Educational standards fell miserably, and the majority of the people lost their ability to think and express ideas effectively either in English or in their indigenous languages.

We then tried to show that there was a link between this poor quality of education and the people's incapacity to participate meaningfully in the development effort of the government. We showed that language was a key factor in the thinking process, and that in a situation where the people could neither think in English because they had limited access to it or in their own languages because they were not developed sufficiently to deal with modern development, there was no way sustainable development could be achieved. The people simply did not have a 'place to stand' to 'move the earth'.

What is the solution to this problem? The short answer is Bilingual Education at least up to the secondary school level, but preferably throughout the education system. The details will be worked out by the experts in this field.

This is not such a revolutionary solution. It is what the government has always had in mind to do when it brought out its policy on education in 1977. The government acknowledged then that the people's languages and cultures were being threatened and could not continue to be neglected, and that the children should be taught to appreciate their languages and cultural institutions. This policy was limited to the primary school, and it was haphazardly implemented. The damage

suffered as a result of this neglect has continued unabated till today.

What we are now recommending is that the policy should be rigorously implemented up to the secondary school level at least, to offer the children permanent literacy in their languages and deep appreciation of their culture. Thus, the existing policy on education, suitably amended, should guarantee the survival of our languages to the point where people could think and write in them and be in a position to pass on indigenous knowledge from one generation to another, and at the same time adapt to modern technology.

The development and standardization of our languages should go on *pari passu* with the improved teaching of Nigerian English as L2 throughout the educational system. As things stand now, English cannot be excluded as an instructional medium in our education system. Other countries like Tanzania had gone along that road and had had to retrace their steps. The mentality of most Nigerians today cannot even tolerate it. There is a general perception that the English language is a veritable unifying force in a country that is an embodiment of multilingualism. English is also seen as an international language of prestige and diplomacy that Nigeria desperately needs to become an effective player on the world stage. Right across the country and at all levels of society, English has acquired economic, political and social significance, such that no-one is prepared to do without it.

This bilingual education, if adequately planned and executed with determination, has a reasonable chance of success. Because of the multilingual status of the country, most people already live in a diglossic environment with English and an indigenous language. Thus, this policy re-invigorates an existing endemic bilingualism which now has official stamp.

This is also a win-win policy in that it satisfies those who want their children to have access to an international language in a global world as well as those who want to continue to make use of their indigenous languages and cultures for thinking and for the psychological satisfaction they derive from knowing that

their languages can be developed and standardized to cope with modern technology.

Furthermore, the systematic teaching of an indigenous language and the improved teaching of English as L2 will have a symbiotic existence. As scientific studies have abundantly shown (UNESCO, 1953; Sweet, 1964:193), the first preparation for the study of a foreign language is the acquisition of a thorough knowledge of the peculiarities of one's own language. And indeed the first requisite for acquiring foreign pronunciation is a parallel knowledge of the sounds of one's own language. What this does is that from the beginning one is taught to regard the grammar of one's own language as part of general grammar. This gives psychological confidence to people to take on the world and to make a success of their lives, whether in learning a new language or taking on an enterprise and seeing it to a successful conclusion.

The solution, therefore, to our national linguistic problem and the associated problems of thinking and planning adequately for the achievement of sustainable development lies in the introduction of a bilingual education in English and an indigenous language to run, if not throughout the Nigerian educational system, at least to the level of the secondary school.

The choice of the indigenous language is to be locally determined, that is, the available mother tongue or the prevailing language of the immediate environment. This recommendation is bound to be an expensive proposition, when the indigenous language requires extensive development and modernization. But if the policy is implemented in a sustained manner, the benefits will more than outweigh the cost of implementation. This is because the bilingual education on offer has several advantages over the existing educational system. Huge sums of money are being dumped into all kinds of failed industrial projects and educational programmes with no tangible results to show. Surely, a good investment is always better than a bad one even if the good one requires more funding for its success. What we are doing now amounts to being a penny wise and a pound

foolish. And there is no sense in continuing with an obviously failed policy.

Even beyond considerations of financial expenditure, important as that is, the bilingual education we are proposing has the great advantage of bolstering the confidence of all Nigerians to achieve results in whatever they undertake to do, like their counterparts in successful economies in other parts of the world. This new educational policy will remove the yolk of inferiority complex which is the bane of our society today.

The government must be involved in this bilingual project because schools of economic thought that have addressed the problem of development in Third World countries over the years have consistently pointed to the role of the state in leading and coordinating economic transformation and the improvement of living standards. Government must be involved in the way English is taught in schools. It must be involved in the recruitment of teachers who have the competence to teach English as L2. When students come to the university, the majority of them have already acquired some knowledge of English. They can talk happily, and often at great length, about things that are happening around them. But, as Katharine Perera ((1981:3) says “this predominantly narrative and descriptive type of language, important though it is, is not the only kind of language that they need in school. The world of the university is generally more formal than the world of the home, and the learning of academic subjects requires rather different kinds of language from the everyday language we find in conversation”. Government must be involved in training competent teachers to provide better English teaching, so that students have less trouble understanding the teacher’s spoken language due to unfamiliar vocabulary, ambiguous references and unfamiliar use of sentence patterns; and so that students can learn to understand their textbooks, and overcome their reading difficulties at discourse level or the structure of factual prose or even their inadequate reading speed. Government must also provide competent teachers for our indigenous languages, so that Nigerians can grow up feeling proud of their languages and

cultures. In a word, government must give them a place to stand in order to move their world of language and development forward. The *locum* in the Latin proverb is Bilingual Education in English and an available indigenous language throughout the educational system or at least up to the secondary school, and the *terram* to be moved is the thinking capacity of Nigerians and their sustainable development. Development is not something that can be achieved through external aid by the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund or through the generosity of a foreign country. It can only happen when Nigerians sit down together to plan their own development in a language in which they have full competence.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen, these are my thoughts on the linguistic situation in Nigeria and how we can change it to achieve sustainable development in the country.

Finally, please permit me to express my gratitude to a number of people who have contributed enormously to my academic career and to my life.

Acknowledgements

You may remember that last session the inaugural lecture delivered on behalf of the Faculty of Arts was given by the Institute of African Studies. That this session's inaugural lecture for the Faculty is again zoned to the Institute must be taken as an act of generosity and understanding on the part of the current Dean of Arts, Professor A.L. Oyeleye and his predecessor in office, Professor Aduke G. Adebayo. They understood that I had to give this lecture today in what, in football, is known as *extra time*, the regulatory period of play having just run out last month. I reckon that I owe this opportunity to them and I hereby thank both of them deeply for it.

I would also like to express my profound gratitude to late Professor John Ferguson, Professor of Classics and Head of Department at the time of my undergraduate admission into the university. The Latin subtitle of this lecture and my reference to the French classicists Corneille, Racine, and Molière are a tribute to this truly great man, who went on to become the Vice-Chancellor of the British Open University.

I also find no better occasion than this one to express my eternal gratitude to Professor Ayo Bamgbose, not only as the undisputed Father of Linguistics in Nigeria to whom every professor of Linguistics makes an iconic reference, but even more so for the unique role he played early in my academic life when he was Dean of the Faculty of Arts in 1972. I am glad today to have known a man of such integrity. It is to him that I owe whatever sense of responsibility and integrity that has guided my steps along my linguistic trajectory.

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Finally, this is one occasion that I have the opportunity to do in public something I think I do not do often enough in private, to thank and appreciate my family. Ayei, Kapoona, Kebee and Efa, thank you so much for being such marvelous children. And Isu, for being such a wonderful wife, eternally beautiful, patient, resilient, supportive, inspirational, loving and affectionate in your own special way, *sam kaani*.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor Sir, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I thank you all for doing me the honour of coming and listening to me. God bless you all.

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