

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION

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EDUCATION is language centred. By the age of five years every normal child has mastered the rudiments of the language of his environment. Every normal adult desires a form of education or another for his children, and he actually starts the process of education at home.

Education has been described as a process of bringing a change to bear on an organism, over and above the change due to normal growth and maturation, in order to change the behaviour of that organism. Education is essentially a process whose aim is to bring about change. Education is pre-eminently a human pursuit whose broad aim is to preserve life and make the preserved life worth living. Even though it has a large number of specific aims, this is the ultimate goal of education.

A language is primarily a system of human sounds that are largely fortuitous in origin, and are honoured by convention for use as a means of communication in a group usually referred to as a speech community. The fortuitousness of the origin of language sounds can be proved in every sound and every word of each of the thousands of languages spoken in the world. Let us take a look at three different groups of sounds by which a commonplace liquid is known in three languages. For the particular liquid, the English name is *water*; the Latin name is *aqua*; the Yoruba name is *omi*. All these three names, for the same liquid, have no individual sounds in common, yet, they all refer to the same thing. The same liquid is known by thousands of other names in the various languages of the world. The choice of a particular name for the particular liquid is largely fortuitous.

There are two major interlocking systems in every language; the system of sounds and the system of syntax, that is, the order in which words are put together to form sentences. To return to the three languages from which our earlier examples have been taken. In putting words together, modern English normally tolerates

the order *cold* + *water* to give *cold water* and not the other way round; Latin tolerates both *aqua* + *frigida* to give *aqua frigida* and *frigida* + *aqua* to give *frigida aqua*. Yoruba, on the other hand, tolerates only *omi* + *tutu* to give *omi tutu* and not the other way round. These are simple illustrations of aspects of syntax in three different languages. The choice of the order of words is largely fortuitous, but this has been stabilized by convention. Thus is born the grammar of any language.

It is these complicated systems of sounds that constitute the vehicle of education. Education without language is hardly possible except in the most rudimentary form. Education without language, through visual demonstrations, is mainly training; training is a part of education but it is not the whole of it.

Language is a supremely human activity. There are talking birds, for instance, parrots and jays. They do not talk in the real sense of the word—they merely echo; they do not construct new sentences, within the rules of the language, as human beings do. It is not known that animals talk human language. It is believed that they merely grunt and have no elaborate grammatical code. Of course, human beings can be wrong in believing that animals have no elaborate language. A well-known mathematician in this country once said facetiously, "You say that goats have no language. Have you ever asked them?"

To test if apes have the natural endowment for learning human speech, some psychologists have attempted to provide a stimulating linguistic environment for the animal. Notable among the experimenters are the Yerkes family (Yerkes, 1916), the Hayes family (Hayes, 1951), and the Kellogg family (Kellogg & Kellogg, 1953), all in America. The Kelloggs, for instance, brought up a nine-month old female chimpanzee in the same environment as their nine-month old son; within a year of being reared together, the human child made normal linguistic progress, but there was no sign of being ready to speak in the animal. The Hayes also attempted to rear a chimpanzee in the environment of human beings so as to make it acquire human speech; after three years of patient guidance the animal was not in any way on the road to speaking human language. These corroborated an earlier experiment with an orangutan by Yerkes in 1916. Research up to date,

therefore, seems to show that, even though apes are about the nearest animals to man in brain development and physical appearance, they are not equipped with that area of the brain that is responsible for learning human language.

Language is not only a means of communication but also an indicator of intelligence. Human babies normally begin to construct simple collocations by the age of one-and-a-half years. If by the end of three years of a baby's life he cannot utter two-word collocations in the language of his environment, his parents begin to get worried. If by the end of the tenth year he cannot speak, he is clearly branded a moron by everybody that knows him. Language is not only an indicator of intelligence but it is also necessary for the growth of this innate ability. If a child develops in a linguistically inadequate environment the growth of his intelligence may be impaired. This has been proved by a number of researchers working on identical twins brought up in different environments.

A classical illustration of the influence of environment on the growth of intelligence was provided by an accident of history. This is the case of the 19th century wild boy of the Aveyron in France. When discovered in the forest, at about the age of seventeen years, he could neither talk nor walk erect. He was probably abandoned in infancy by unfriendly people who had given him several cuts and supposed him dead. He had lived in the company of animals until he was discovered. It can be reasonably assumed that he was born with the normal endowments of a human infant. After much patient teaching by Itard, a famous French physician of deaf-mutes, he could only continue to grunt like an animal. It was too late for the wild boy to learn human speech. The explanation seems to be that he lost his natural endowment for learning as a result of a long exposure to linguistically impoverished surroundings.

Let us examine further the influence of environment on the acquisition of language. A human child learns naturally, as a first language, that which he is in contact with. This first language is normally referred to as the mother tongue. But in some cases, in the environment of a language different from that of the parents, the child naturally and easily picks up a first language that may

not literally be his mother tongue. The difficulties of language learning are not conspicuous when children learn because they do it virtually full-time and the play way. But in addition to this full-time learning they also have better teachers than the conventional ones, and have a higher ratio of teachers to pupils. In the conventional classroom there is usually one teacher for thirty pupils; in the language-learning situation at home there may be, on occasions, thirty teachers to one child! This is a ratio that can never be duplicated in any formal learning situation.

Over and above these large numbers of teachers, there is also the fact that the adults who serve as informal language teachers succeed better at the job than conventional, trained teachers. Jespersen and Palmer have said that these adult models achieve better results than trained teachers because they are not teachers in the real sense of the word. (Jespersen, 1904, Palmer (n.d.) *passim*). Jespersen says, and quite rightly, that the informal teacher is more patient in correcting mistakes of the child than the conventional classroom teacher. The informal teacher corrects mistakes patiently, usually in a playful mood, without using the jargon of the teacher grammarian. Those of us who are professional teachers of language have a great lesson to learn here.

We must now address ourselves briefly to some erroneous beliefs about the acquisition of language. Some people have said that it is difficult for an African to speak a European language correctly because his organs of speech are not created for them. The same thing has been said about Europeans speaking African languages. This is an utter fiction. Speech organs are not created for speaking any particular language. To be more specific the saying that Africans cannot produce some sounds correctly because their lips are thick is a figment of the imagination. Brosnahan and others have done quite a lot of work in this area and have come to the conclusion that no nationality's speech organs are specially adapted for the language or languages of his nation only (Brosnahan, 1961).

The truth of the matter is that once a person has learnt any language at all as a first language, the sounds he has acquired, the grammatical patterns of the language, and the processes of thought in that culture interfere with his acquisition of another

language. There are cases of Africans who grew up in the environment of, say, the English language and acquired it flawlessly. On returning to their home country, after about 12 years of speaking English and English alone, they find it difficult to acquire their own mother tongue. This is because the thought processes and other things associated with the English language keep interfering with the learning of their own mother tongue on their own soil. If organs of speech were specially created for the language of the parents of a child this situation would not arise.

Only last year, during a discussion on certain aspects of language, an English lady told me a funny story: her grandmother visited a white couple who had adopted a black girl. She was just about three months old. The white family lavished affection on the African girl. In her consternation the visiting grand old lady asked, "But how on earth can you understand this girl when she begins to talk?"

As a result of a number of factors that influence language learning, varieties of the same language emerge. Randolph Quirk and others in *A Grammar of Contemporary English* published last year refer to five acceptable varieties of language and also a sixth one which is an aberration. (Quirk, *et al.*, 1972, p. 13). They say that varieties occur in the same language as a result of the following major factors: region, education, subject-matter, medium of expression, attitude, and interference.

We are all aware of regional variations in what is known as the same language. These regional variations are normally referred to as dialects of the same language. We do not need to waste our time on examining the theories of the origin of dialects. It is sufficient to mention briefly that speakers of various dialects most probably lived as one speech community and spoke the same variety of language; over a period of time they moved apart and lived in small pockets. This separation led to dialectal varieties of the original language. When dialects grow apart so much that they become mutually unintelligible, they become separate languages.

Education has a profound influence on the language spoken by anyone. The type of language naturally picked up in one's environment is usually adequate for carrying on the normal,

day-to-day affairs of the community. Education is a specialized process. Conventional education takes over from where the informal education of the environment leaves off. There are specialized vocabularies for various disciplines. These are normally acquired in organized institutions of education. The language of educated discourse is usually more formal, more stilted and sometimes more archaic than everyday language. The vocabulary of an educated person is usually much larger than that of the illiterate. All these are some of the influences of education on language acquisition.

It is common knowledge that one's topic of discourse has a profound influence on how one says things. Subject-matter influences the acquisition and use of language. To take the first illustration from everyday life. No one would make a request to a senior person using the type of language he would use for telling a folk story to his friends. The use of language in an academic discourse, as earlier pointed out, is quite different from the use of language in everyday, informal discussions. If anyone discussed his experience of the day before with his friends in a language suitable for delivering a political speech or a lecture on taxation, they would think that there was something wrong with him in the head or that he was simply being ridiculous.

The medium through which language is expressed has a tremendous influence on it. The two sharply contrasting media are speech and writing. More things in the world are said in speech than in writing. Speech has the additional advantage that the whole of the speaker can normally be seen when he is talking. Conversation is therefore carried on not only through speech but through gesticulation. A conversation normally understood when it takes place face-to-face becomes a meaningless jumble of words when written. In a speech situation there could be things like:

Yes. You know what I . . . That's right. That's the . . .

O. K. Will . . . Agreed.

In writing this is quite meaningless; but in a face-to-face conversation supplemented with gesticulation, the conversation might be perfectly intelligible. This situation then puts a very great

strain on anybody communicating in writing. Because he cannot employ gesticulation and various intonations of the voice he has to be extra careful in phrasing and re-phrasing his whole discourse. In addition, because writing is not as evanescent as speech he has to watch his style more carefully because any reader can go over the written text and examine it more critically. Mercifully, this type of critical examination is not possible in unrecorded speech. These are two of the areas in which the medium of expression influences the type of language used.

The attitude of the speaker to his listeners affects his use of language. As Randolph Quirk and others wrote, a group of distinguished guests may be requested to do something in the following words:

Distinguished patrons are requested to ascend to the second floor. (Quirk, *et al.*, 1972, p. 25).

This type of utterance shows restraint and respect for the guests. If the speaker were addressing fellow friends, or people junior to him, he might use a different set of words as follows:

Up you get, you fellows!

We see in these two examples how the attitude of the speaker to his hearers affects his choice of language.

The sixth type of variety of language referred to by Randolph Quirk is that due to interference. This is not one of the acceptable varieties of language. Interference is the adverse effect of a previously learnt language, or languages, on a language learnt later. The greatest area of interference is in the sound system. We are all familiar with the remark that someone is speaking the English language with a Yoruba tone or that an Englishman is speaking the Yoruba language with an English tone. This is interference in the area of phonology. Interference also takes place in the areas of grammar and semantics. To take only one example of interference in the area of semantics. Many teachers of English are familiar with essays containing expressions such as *I went to see my fathers at Ikorodu*. Where *fathers* is the polite form of the singular *father* in the Yoruba language.

Language is the first major educational hurdle that a child clears. Any child that is intelligent enough to learn the language of his environment is equipped with enough mental ability to learn many other things in life. A moron that cannot learn a language, that cannot clear the first major educational hurdle, can hardly learn anything of great worth in life.

We have examined the existence of varieties within the same language. Let us now take a look at a variety of languages within the same country. We do not have far to seek before getting examples; Nigeria, we have been told, has at least two hundred different languages. The National Broadcasting Corporation broadcasts its news in the following nine major Nigerian languages: Edo, Efik, Fulfude, Hausa, Igbo, Ijaw, Kanuri, Tiv and Yoruba. One can therefore conclude that the nine Nigerian languages are the most widely understood in the twelve states of the Federation. Of all the countries in Africa it appears that only Rwanda is lucky in being unilingual. It has, however, a population of only 3.5 million.

It is a well-known fact that Nigeria has no national language. The English language, as a result of our political history, is the official language of the country. It has a unifying effect in the country. Much has been said by various writers about the role of a national language. Time permits me to refer to only two of the distinguished things that have been said: Jespersen, writing in 1904, described a national language as:

... the access to the best thoughts and institutions of a foreign nation, its literature, culture—in short, the spirit of the nation in the widest sense of the word (Jespersen (n.d.—1904), p. 9).

Sixty years after, B. Wallace wrote in 1964:

... language, the receptacle and unifying agent of ... culture (Wallace, 1964, p. 167).

In exactly the same year that B. Wallace wrote the above something curious happened in Kenya. The Education Commission, reporting that year, said that the vernacular should not be used in the schools of Kenya because it was ill adapted for education.

(Gorman, ed., 1970, p. 18). The Kenya report is a curious one in the light of the abundant evidence that points to the evocative value of a mother tongue.

It is now accepted in most parts of the world that a child's mother tongue is the best language for his primary education. It is to the credit of the early Christian Missionaries in Nigeria that they decided that education could be given in the mother tongue as necessary (Hilliard, 1957, p. 119). That is still the practice in primary education in the country till today. Usually, the English language is taught as early as the first or second year of primary school education. By about the fourth year, an attempt is made to make the English language the medium of instruction. This practice is now being challenged at the Institute of Education of the University of Ife. In the six-year primary school project, financed by the Ford Foundation, English is being taught throughout as a subject, while Yoruba is made the medium of instruction for all other subjects. An evaluation will be made at the end of the experiment. We are all keenly awaiting the report of the project.

As a result of our colonial history, the well educated Nigerian is bilingual: he speaks at least his mother tongue and the English language. Many Nigerians are multilingual; this is to be expected in a polyglot community.

Michael West wrote of bilingualism in 1926:

Ordinarily bilingualism means no more than the co-existence of two languages, both at a level of efficiency, both being indispensable. But the two languages are not equally efficient nor do they fulfil the same function; the one may be the language of ordinary occasions and the home, while the other is subsidiary and serves certain special occasions for which the first is inadequate. (West, 1926, p. 59).

This is the situation in present-day Nigeria; except that one should modify the end of that quotation by saying that no language is intrinsically inadequate for any aspect of world culture that a community has integrated into its own; I do not need to remind you that, during the hey-day of classical education in Britain, English was considered unsuitable for the education of the English.

A good deal has been written on the problems of bilingualism. There are several points of view. One group of researchers say that bilingualism is definitely harmful—that it hampers educational development; another group says that bilingualism is neutral in its effect on the education of a child; a third group says that while bilingualism is harmful during the period of primary education its effect is neutral by the first year in the university.

Jespersen and Michael West clearly belong to the group that felt that bilingualism was positively harmful. In 1922, Jespersen wrote that the bilingual child was hampered in both languages. In 1926 Michael West wrote:

The great disadvantage of a bilingual country is that the merely average boy and the boy of no special linguistic attitude or inclination is compelled to learn a second language (West, 1926, p. 55).

In 1944 Dorothy T. Spoerl wrote as follows about bilingualism at the college level:

... it becomes clear that, at least, at the college level, there are no continuing effects which stem from a bilingual childhood and which show themselves in the academic records, vocational choices, or English abilities, of bilingual students. Neither does bilinguality seem to have any significant effect on the performance of college age bilingual students on a verbal test of intelligence. If there were a bilingual handicap in childhood functioning in either academic or verbal adjustments it has certainly become stabilized by the first year of college. (Spoerl, 1944, p. 156).

The case of Dr Ronjat's bilingual son is a classical example of near 100% bilingualism. (West, 1926, p. 59ff.) It was decided as an experiment by both parents that the boy should be brought up as a bilingual. His father always spoke to him French and French only. His mother addressed him in German all the time. By the age of 53 months the boy was fluent in both languages. Later in life he was also equally fluent in conversation in both languages. At the time of the experiment he did not know that he was learning two languages. He only knew that he had to

use a particular set of words in addressing his father and another set in conversing with his mother. In school he found it easier to express himself in French in all technical matters. For all literary matters he used German—his evocative mother tongue.

The influence of bilingualism on mental development is still confused. There is no straightforward answer yet. As recently as 1961 Tore Osterberg surveyed the literature and concluded that bilingualism had no adverse effect on education (Osterberg, 1961, p. 24); whereas in 1966 Macnamara upheld the "balance theory" that bilingual children are adversely affected:

These studies of Spanish-English bilinguals lend considerable weight to the balance theory, that is that most people are unable to learn two languages simultaneously as well as monoglots learn one by itself". (Macnamara, 1966, p. 19).

This pronouncement agrees with the findings of the Welsh researchers on the problems of bilingualism in Britain (Jones, 1966, *passim*). Whatever the influence of bilingualism on learning may be, it cannot be doubted that it fulfils a practical role in a multilingual society.

It is pertinent to hazard some opinions on the matter of the first language of a Nigerian child living in Nigeria. It is the fashion among some members of the Nigerian elite to bring up their children on the English language at home. There are homes in which practical necessity demands this if both parents do not speak the same language. Where both parents speak the same language, particularly the language of the environment in which they live, the best thing for the language development of the child is to bring him up on the language of that speech community.

In most of the observed cases, a child brought up on the English language, spoken by only his father and his mother, lacks the chance of communing with his immediate environment. If both parents spend little time at home, as a result of being at their jobs, the language development of the child is normally retarded. We all know the precept that 'practice makes perfect'. If a child is brought up on the language of the environment, most of the people he is in contact with in that community are, in essence, his language teachers and not just his two parents. In cases

where such children are left in the care of semi-literate maids, the type of English picked up is bad, and the child's general linguistic development is slow because of the absence of a large number of effective interlocutors. Observation has shown that if the language of the child's environment is well mastered, it enriches his experience of the world, and this serves him in good stead in his later education. Wide experience is also one of the factors for the easy acquisition of a second language. It is definitely a better compromise to bring up a child on both English and the language of his environment than on English alone as this tends to lead to linguistic starvation. The influence of monolingualism, in the language of the environment, before bilingualism, is still being studied.

A high degree of motivation is needed by both adults and children for becoming bilingual. As P.G.L. Forge said:

Motivation of a peculiar type, characterised by a willingness to be like valued members of a language community, furthers acquisition of a second language. (Forge, 1971, p. 60).

The emphasis is on the willingness of the learner "to be like valued members of a language community". If anyone despises the members of a language community the chances are that he will not be willing to learn its language. This explains why many adults live in a language community for, say, thirty years without knowing the language.

Children and adults differ in the way they learn a second language. Children usually interact more with the people of the environment and pick up a second language almost unconsciously in the street. Most adults, especially for business purposes, acquire a second language consciously. They actually apply themselves studiously to the learning situation. Because of the higher maturation of the adult, he succeeds better at the initial stages of language learning in a classroom situation than children. David L. Wolfe said:

... the adult has developed, in the course of his maturation, a general overall psychological consciousness equipped to deal in generalizations and abstractions as well as with linguistic concepts". (Wolfe, 1967, p. 174).

It is as a result of this higher maturation and ability to deal in generalizations that an adult succeeds more quickly than a child when learning a language in an artificial situation. This is particularly true of the more rapid progress made by an adult in learning to *read* a foreign language. On the whole, however, children succeed better than adults in learning a second language, particularly in its phonology. This is because children do it unconsciously, with fewer inhibitions and generally interact more with people.

We must now come to the matter of a national language. Nigeria has no single national language. English, a foreign language, is the official language of education, business and administration in the country. It is spoken by less than fifteen per cent of the whole population. It has been suggested that English may, in the long run, become Nigeria's national language. I cannot see this happening for many generations to come. As already mentioned, the percentage of people speaking it in the country now is very low. If it becomes a national language, it will cease to be English: it will become a different language just as Latin became the Romance language.

What I have always defended stoutly is that if English is to remain a language of international communication, attempts must be made to teach only such forms as are acceptable to English speech communities. The example of Jamaican creole is with us at the present time. It has been described by D. R. Craig as a native speech which is related to but not English. Jamaican creole corresponds at the level of lexicon, to a large extent, to English but diverges significantly at the very important levels of grammar and phonology (Craig, 1966, pp. 49-53).

In *A Grammar of Contemporary English* by Randolph Quirk and others the following example of Jamaican creole is quoted:

Hin sed den, 'Ma, a we in lib?' Hie sie, 'Mi no nuo, mi pikini, bot duon luk fi hin niem hahd, ohr eni wie in a di wohld an yu kal di niem, hin hie unu.' Hin sed, 'Wel Ma, mi want im hie mi a nuo mi.' Lahd nuo, masa! Duo no kal di niem, hin wi kom kil yu'. Hin sie, 'Wel Ma, hin wi haf fi kil mi'. (p. 27)

(He said then, 'Ma, and where does he live?' She says, 'I don't know, my child, but don't look hard for his name, or anywhere in all the world that you call the name, he will hear you'. He said, 'Well, Ma, I want him to hear me and know me'. 'Lord, no, master! Do not call the name: he will come and kill you'. He says, 'Well, Ma, he will have to kill me'.)

No one who knows only English can read and understand it. Quite rightly, Randolph Quirk and others say that Jamaican creole has become virtually institutionalized as a different language. The same thing has happened to a form of the English language in New Guinea. It is now institutionalized as Neomelanesian; it is used by the public press, for local administration and for educational, secular, and religious purposes. Anyone who listens to Neomelanesian will agree that it is no more English. Here is a Neomelanesian version of a part of St Mark's Gospel:

Na olman bai i bel nogud long yufela bilong nem bilong mi. Tasol man i stap strong oltaim i go i kamap long finis bilong em, disfela i ken stap gud oltaim. (Quirk, *et al.*, p. 27).

(And everyone will feel badly towards you on account of my name. But anyone who stays strong right till the end, this person will remain in well-being for ever).

The matter of a national language is not one that can be decreed. When Edward III of Britain ruled in 1362 that English should become the language of education, the courts of law and administration, his country was in a situation different from that in which Nigeria is today. At that time French was the language of culture, of education and of the minority in Britain. The majority of Britons spoke the English language. What King Edward III did then was to lend royal support to the practice of the majority of his people. A national language can only emerge through a process of slow, natural evolution. The evolution of Amharic in Ethiopia, to take the place of Geez as a national language, is a case in point. This has happened over a number of centuries.

A number of suggestions have been made in Nigerian newspapers and other media about how to evolve a national language. It has been suggested that the three major Nigerian languages should be taught in various combinations in the various states

of the Federation. This will hasten the process of natural evolution and elimination. The increased mobility of the people of the country will also hasten this process of evolution. But there is no escaping the fact that the emergence of a single national language will take many generations. It cannot happen in our own time. The country can only wait and hope.

In conclusion, I want to remind you once more that language is the vehicle of thought. Education is the transmission of cherished thoughts. A national language, which is one's mother tongue is the ideal medium of expressing a nation's thoughts.

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