

Decolonising the English Language in Our Children's Educational Development

Yemi Ogunsiji

Department of English, Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo, Ondo State, Nigeria
Telephone: +2348035674622, E-mail: yemi.ogunsiji@yahoo.com

KEYWORDS Domestication. Indigenisation. Decolonisation. Culture. Education

ABSTRACT The human society is glued together by language. In fact, language is the only tool that makes the interaction and the togetherness of the *homo sapien* to be possible. Language is also the vehicle that we use to convey our culture and tradition. This implies that a people's culture can be fully appreciated through the language of the owners of that culture and that no culture can develop or progress beyond the level of development of the language of the owner. With this strategic importance of language to culture and of course, to nationhood, this paper is of the view that the education of the Nigerian child should be in the language that will reflect the culture of the child's environment. If the otherwise is done, it amounts to alienating the child from his culture, nay, from his roots. The language situation in Nigeria is a common knowledge of everybody. The English language is generally accepted as the medium of instruction in the country's schools and there has not been any alternative to this. However, this paper argues that there is the need to indigenise or domesticate the English language used in the Nigerian schools such that it will reflect the environment and cultural background of our children. This, it is believed, becomes imperative if the education of the Nigerian children, and of course, their personality, will not be totally rubbished.

INTRODUCTION

Language plays a very prominent role in our society. Its strategic position in the scheme of our existence places the needed emphasis on language. It has been stated that language is the cement of society (Wardhaugh 1972). One wonders if the society will ever be organised without language. Culture is another important index that cannot be done away with as far as language is concerned. It guides and directs us to know (in the words of Hymes 1972: 269) "when to speak, when not, and what to talk about, with whom, when, where and in what manner". Apart from this, whatever scientific and technological breakthrough achieved by man to date is attributable to the existence of language. Emenanjo (1988) believes that language is everywhere. In the same vein, Langacker (1973) observes that language permeates our thoughts and mediates our relations with others. All these boil down to the importance of language and the series of role it is performing in the society.

With the identified role of language in the society, one can now apprehend the role it is playing in education. Without language, education would not have existed in any way, and if this is the case, the whole society would have been totally disorganised.

The English Language in Nigeria: The language situation in Nigeria is known to all today.

Again, the cultural diversity is another contesting factor. With these underground problems and coupled with the necessity of modern education and the Nigeria's colonial experience, the English language, which is a neutral language has today come to be accepted as our national language. It has also come to be equally accepted as the official medium of instruction in our schools even though it is a foreign language. Since our linguistic and cultural situations have not allowed us to have a unified local language, a foreign substitute has replaced what should have been our mother tongue. A first language expresses what Emile Durkheim calls the "collective consciousness" of its owner. This is to say that a people's first language is symbiotic with their culture.

In Nigeria and most other English colonised countries, the role being played by English is enormous. It is the language of administration, governance, diplomacy, and of course, language of education among others. For in depth understanding, see Bamgbose (1971), Banjo (1996).

Language and Education: The use of one's mother tongue as a medium of instruction seems to be the ideal one. A six-year research carried out by the University of Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University, revealed that Nigerian child will be better off if the mother tongue (Yoruba) is used as a medium of instruction. Scientific and technological innovations are even said to be

most effortlessly and spontaneously done in the language in which people eat, dream, love and do a lot of things. Such a language is the one in which one's whole personality is enmeshed. Because of the language problem we have in Nigeria, education with the use of mother tongue as a language of instruction cannot be realised. Apart from the multiplicity of language, rural-urban migration has created a situation whereby a Nigerian teacher could have in his class pupils representing as many as ten languages. In a situation like this, it will be unwise to think of adoption of one Nigerian language as a medium of instruction. The only alternative here is a neutral language like English.

With the realisation of the intricate relationship between language and culture and by implication, between language and nationhood, it then becomes a strong conviction that the closest alternative to educating the Nigerian child is for the Nigerian teacher to completely domesticate the English language so as to transform it from an Anglo-Saxon frame into a Nigerian reality. By doing this, the teacher will go a long way in making the language reflect the culture of the Nigerian child's environment. Today, we are witnesses to the counter-productivity of suffusing the English language taught in Nigerian schools with words that reflect British culture and world-view; words that mean nothing to the Nigerian child as they do not convey genuine familiar thoughts to him. This has also contributed to the yearly mass failure in English.

We have been talking of different varieties of English in Nigeria but the series of varieties have not actually addressed the real domestication of some terms that will help understanding in the teaching/learning process. There are some groups of people who believe that anything that is in contradistinction with the variety of the owner of the language is unacceptable. Such group of people have forgotten that we are in a different environment with different variables. Hicherson (1980:106) has made us understand that "a language enables its speakers to relate to their environment, to describe and identify natural and cultural objects and to organise and coordinate their activities". Some other scholars have also corroborated this assertion. See Bialystok (2000), Olateju (2004) and Serbesta (2008) for more comprehensive explanations.

In engaging in the venture of domestication of the English language used and taught in

Nigerian schools, the teacher should not be intimidated by arguments as to the unassailable position of English in our society. While we believe that no serious-minded Nigerian, let alone a teacher, can afford to ignore the English language in Nigeria, we believe it to be the duty of every Nigerian teacher of English language, and, in fact, every teacher who uses the language as a medium of instruction in school to decolonise and indigenise the language so that it can become fully Nigerian in every sense. The traditions of the standardisation of the spoken language are maintained primarily by the public school. It is therefore, high time public school teachers and planners of school curricular joined hands to see to the emergence of the Nigerian English that is known to be standard. With time, and if well-sustained, the variety will also enjoy equal status as that of the original owners of the language.

METHODOLOGY

The method used in this study is basically expository. This becomes imperative because of the need to explain thoroughly the concept of domestication so as to provide the basis for this new stand. Examples of some usages that call for indigenisation were highlighted and issues were raised on them.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

As a result of the state of English in Nigeria, coupled with the state of language use in the present dispensation, it then becomes important to look at the use of English in such a way that will be concomitant with our culture and environment. Our discussions will be done in the subdivisions below:

The Domestication of the Language

Achebe (1966) has pointed out that Africans have learnt English well enough to be able to use it effectively to create and to suit the environment where it is being used. He added that it is not necessary and not desirable for an African to be able to use English like a native speaker. To him, African writers should aim to use English in a way that brings out its message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. The view of Achebe is very pungent here and if

we look at it from the perspective of teaching and learning, we will discover that the same thing goes for the language of instruction in our schools. The decolonisation /domestication exercise we are advocating should affect almost every aspect of our English. However, there are some areas that need urgent attention but in this paper, we shall be limited to two salient areas that are of utmost importance. These are the areas of *imageries* and *vocabulary items*.

(i) Area of Imageries: Shada (1995) has pointed out that most of the imageries we are using can only be properly understood in the light of an in depth knowledge of the culture, tradition and history of the people. The following are examples of the imageries of imageries:

as white as snow
as bright as a new penny
as calm as a summer sea
as crafty as a fox
as pure as winter snow
as smart as six pence

Expressions like these should not, for any reason, be taught the Nigerian children because they will mean nothing to them. Most Nigerian children do not know what is meant by “summer”, “winter”, “snow” and so on. So, using those terms to teach them will be a fruitless exercise. An alternative should be found to replace each of the alien lexical items in the examples given. A simile like “as white as chalk” would be more meaningful and it will last longer in the child’s memory. “As crafty as tortoise” is another good example of the process of domestication. Most African children have seen or heard of tortoise one way or the other and they know the meaning that surrounds tortoise.

(ii) Areas of Vocabulary: Another area of interest in the process of domestication is that of vocabulary if we want to truly decolonise Nigerian English. One vital area we would want to look into is that of kinship. Some kinship terms and race-redolent words have become parts of our vocabulary in English. Kinship terms like uncle, cousin, nephew, aunt among others should not be part of the Nigerian English vocabulary since they do not carry along with them the same cultural connotations as they have for the English people. The same thing goes for terms like “half-brother”, “half-sister”, “step-father”, “step-mother”. All these are lacking in our culture and as such, their meanings in the British or American contexts cannot be found in our own environment. It is

suggested that the meanings of such emotive terms like “brother”, “sister”, “father” or “mother” should be extended in such a way that they mean the same things as they do in our native languages. We all know that in our respective cultures, the word “father” for example, means something deeper and wider than the English “father”. The continuous use of such culture-barren words as uncle, cousin, aunt, nephew, niece has often led to situations where brothers commit incest with their “sisters” because their relationship as “cousin” does not transmit any cultural message that would have been the case if he knew that she was his “sister”.

Still, in the area of vocabulary, there is the need to decolonise the word “black”. This has become necessary because of the racial connotations that have been associated with the word. Anything “black” has some degree of negative implication. Words like black spot, blackleg, blackmail, blacklist, black magic, black book, black market, black sheep, black maria, black guard, black cap, and black bomb should be ‘whitelisted’ and expunged from our vocabulary as they have constituted ‘white spots’ from our inglorious colonial past. We have allowed their continued existence because the white men had craftily ‘whitemailed’ us into believing that black is an evil colour and that whatever is black should be abhorred. No wonder, the ‘whitelegs’ among Africa’s womenfolk have spent fortunes in the futile effort to change the colour of their skins. Such people are the ‘whitesheep’ among us who are unwittingly enjoying a fatal ride in the ‘white maria’ of colonial mentality.

The question may be asked as to what is outlandish in having a black spot on a black skin. If a black spot looks ugly on a white skin, so does a white spot on a black skin! The speakers of the English language as a first language should know that there is nothing abnormal about a black man having a black leg. The Nigerian English teacher should teach the Nigerian child accordingly that a white leg in Nigerian English refers to a woman of easier morals and low decorum.

Another significant lexical item that should be expunged is the meaning attached to the word “orthodox”. The word has a racial connotation. For example, everything European is seen orthodox while everything African is “unorthodox”; hence Christianity is referred to as an orthodox religion while African Traditional Religion is seen as “unorthodox”. Orthodox medicine refers to

Western brand of medicine while African medicine is unorthodox. The Nigerian teacher who teaches this to the Nigerian child is invariably telling the child that the food he eats, his music, his culture, and in fact, his personality are unorthodox. We believe that our own variety of English should express African ethos and as such, it is argued that our use of the word 'orthodox' should reflect African reality to the fullest.

The Nigerian teacher should see the exercise of indigenising our English as a nationalistic imperative because according to Emenanjo (1988), "if a society corrupts language, language can in turn corrupt thought" (P.22). So, for our thought and tradition to remain uncorrupted, much should be done on the English language we are teaching our children. Apart from the few examples we have highlighted here, proper scrutiny will reveal quite a good number of words and beliefs that need to be domesticated so as to connote the meaning that will be in line with our environment. Such words and concepts are necessary for the advancement of our culture, educational development and of course, our nationhood.

CONCLUSION

No doubt, there is the need to domesticate the English language in Nigeria such that it will have what Oyeleye (1990) calls 'local colour' that will allow easy understanding of some terms and concepts that are alien. This paper is in agreement with the opinion of Achebe (1965) that the African writers and teachers should aim at using the English language in a way that brings out the message best without altering the language to the extent of losing its value as a medium of international exchange.

This is not for African writers only but for the users of English as a second language and of course, teachers who are using the language as a medium of instruction. Language is vibrant and dynamic and if such domestication is done, it reinforces the language as a true variety of English in Nigeria. It will also make use of the Nigeria Educational system as a launching pad in this exercise. We need to know that an exercise like this cannot take place in a twinkling of an eye, it has to be consciously and systematically done so as to stand the test of time and to perform the functions expected of the language. Our language is symbolic of our culture and according to Sapir (1921), the worlds in which different societies live

are distinct worlds and not merely the same world with different labels attached. As such, the languages which different societies and cultures use cannot be the same; language needs to be made in such a way that it will totally reflect the culture and environment of the users.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From our discussions so far, there is the need to domesticate some aspects of the English language with a view to ensuring that such words do not constitute impediments in the teaching/learning process. The environment, the linguistic context of the learners, together with other contextual variables, must be properly addressed so as to ensure effective learning most especially in a second language situation like ours.

REFERENCES

- Achebe C 1966. The English Language and the African Writers. *Insight*. October- December, 19-20.
- Bamgbose A 1971. The English Language in Nigeria. In: J Spencer (Ed.): *Language in West Africa*. London: Longman, pp. 35-48.
- Banjo A 1996. *Making a Virtue of Necessity: An Overview of the English Language*. Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press.
- Bialystok E 2001. *Bilingualism in Development: Language, Literacy and Cognition*. Cambridge: CUP
- Emenanjo EN 1988. *Linguistics, Language and the Nation*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.
- Hickey NP 1980. *Linguistic Anthropology*. New York: Rinehart and Winston.
- Hymes DH 1972. On Communicative Competence. In: JB Pride, J Holmes (Eds.): *Sociolinguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Langacker R 1973. *Language and its Structure*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich.
- Olateju M 2004. *Discourse Analysis: Analysing Discourse in the ESL Classroom*. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press.
- Oyeleye L 1990. Domesticating the English Language in Nigeria: The Example of Achebe's 'Local Colour' Varieties. *Journal of the Nigeria English Studies Association*, 28-45.
- Sapir E 1921. *Language*. New York: Harcourt Brace and World Inc.
- Serbesta RW 2008. *Concept of Programming Languages*. Boston: Pearson Education Inc.
- Shada O 1995. The Place of Culture and History in the Understanding of Imagery: Yoruba as a Case Study. *Paper presented at the 7th International Conference of WAACLALS*, Owerri, Nigeria.
- Wardlaugh R 1977. *Introduction to Linguistics*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Williams D 1990. *English language Teaching: An Integrated Approach*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited.