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BABEL OF NIGER STATE

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Abstract

This paper is a preliminary report on an ongoing research being carried out in the Faculty of Languages and Communication Studies of Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University, Lapai, Niger State, Nigeria. The research is on 'Language education and translation in Niger State'. The languages involved in the research are: Arabic, English, French, Gbagyi, Hausa and Nupe. The aim of this research which is funded by the Nigerian Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) is 'to help improve the outcome of language education and translation in Niger State in both quality and quantity'. As a preliminary inquiry, the research team visited 78 institutions of learning at all levels (primary, secondary and tertiary) in all the three geopolitical zones of Niger State, as well as media houses located in the capital, Minna, and obtained responses to the questionnaires they took to the institutions. While pursuing the aim and objectives of their main research, the team deemed it necessary to consider the position (and the plight) of the multiplicity of other languages of Niger State (than the three major ones – Gbagyi, Hausa and Nupe) in relation to Nigeria's language policy in education. The team found that there are conflicting reports on these languages with regard to their exact number, their location, their status, and even their spelling. The team learned that there are at least 38 languages in Niger State, some of which have several dialects as well. This side-line research concluded, therefore, that it would be a tall order to insist on implementing certain aspects of the national language policy in education in respect of the users of these languages, some of whom do not even speak Hausa, the most widely spread of the three major indigenous languages in the State. This research recommended, therefore, that the Niger State Government

should consider establishing a language policy, and drawing up a specific plan, that will enable it to implement relevant aspects of the national language policy in education.

Key Words: Languages, Niger State, Language policy, Education

Introduction

The title of this paper, 'Babel of Niger State', reflects the linguistic situation in a State with a multiplicity of languages. The paper itself is a preliminary report on a research being carried out in the Faculty of Languages and Communication Studies of Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University, Lapai, Niger State, Nigeria. The research is on 'Language Education and Translation in Niger State'. It is funded by the Nigerian Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) and involves the three foreign languages in use, or studied, in Niger State (Arabic, English and French) and the three major indigenous languages of the State (Gbagyi, Hausa and Nupe).

The aim of this side-line inquiry is to determine the position of the many languages of Niger State which are classified as minority languages.

Niger State is one of the 36 States that make up the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It covers an area of 76,363 km², thus ranking 1st out of Nigeria's 36 States. But in population, with its 3,954,772 inhabitants, it ranks 18th out of the 36 States. At least 38 indigenous languages are said to be spoken in the 25 Local Government Areas of Niger State. In a country that has about 500 languages spoken in its 36 States, plus the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, 38 languages are quite a lot for a single State. We know that there are some States in Nigeria in which only one indigenous language is spoken (with or without larger population than Niger State). But we do not know if there is any State in Nigeria which has more indigenous languages than Niger State.

The paper emanates from an inquiry into the nature and status of this babel of languages in a single State in Nigeria. It will enumerate the languages and indicate the locations where they are spoken. Then it will ask and discuss the pertinent question: 'how can the country's national language policy in education be implemented in Niger State?' Finally, it will make recommendations which could, it is hoped, help resolve the State's own problem of language policy (or lack of policy).

The Languages of Niger State

How many indigenous languages are there in Niger State, really? Perhaps a look at the two lists that follow might shed some light on this question. The lists enumerate the languages of Niger State. The first list (Table 1) has been filtered from the long list of Nigerian languages published in *Ethnologue* (Eberhard et al: 2019). The second list (Table 2) comes from a research carried out in 2013 by 'Miss NYSC Niger State Batch B 2013 transformation campaign' (accessed at https://web.facebook.com/187109924815414/posts/languages-of-niger-statethere-are-38-languages-spoken-as-first-language-in-niger/187407254785681/?_rdc=1&_rdr).

Table1: Languages of Niger State

S/No	Name of language	Location or Local Government Area (LGA) in which spoken
1	Acipa	Kontagora
2	Adara	Munya, Paikoro
3	Asu	Kontagora, Mashegu
4	Basa-Gumna	Chanchaga
5	Basa-Gurmana	Chanchaga & Rafi border, Rafin Gurmana
6	Bassa-Kontagora	Mariga, north-east of Kontagora
7	Bauchi	Rafi, Shiroro.
8	Boko	Borgu
9	Busa	Borgu
10	Cahungwarya	Rafi, Kagara and Maikujeri town areas
11	Cicipu	Mariga, Kakihum and Kumbashi
12	Cishingini	Agwara and Borgu
13	C'Lela	Rijau
14	Dibo	Agaie, Katcha and Lapai
15	Fulfulde, Benin-Togo	West of Kainji river
16	Fungra	Rafi
17	Gbagyi	Chanchaga, Rafi, Shiroro and Suleja
18	Gbari	Zungeru to Kaduna river north, southeast through Agaie, Chanchaga, Lapai, Minna, Paiko, Rafi and Suleja
19	Gupa-Abawa	Lapai, Edzu and Gupa areas
20	Gurmana	Shiroro, Gumana town areas
21	Hausa	Widespread in Nigeria - 48,300,000 in Nigeria
22	Huu-Saare	Rijau
23	Kakanda	Agaie and Lapai, Niger river centered on Bida
24	Kami	Lapai, Ebo town and 11 villages
25	Kanuku	Chanchaga, Mariga and Rafi
26	Kanuri	Widespread
27	Kupa	Katcha
28	Laru	Borgu, Several villages on Niger river banks
29	Lopa	Magama + others
30	Nupe-Nupe-Tako	Agaie, Gbako, Lapai and Mariga
31	Pangu	Rafi, Gumna and Tegin districts
32	Reshe	Borgu, Niger river banks, north of Busa
33	Shama-Sambuga	Mariga and Rafi
34	Sorku	Lake Kainji
35	Tanjijili	Chanchaga and Suleja, Kafin Koro on Minna to Abuja road, about 10 villages
36	Tsikimba	Magama, Mariga and Mashegu, Auna and Wara areas on Niger river
37	Tsishingini	Kontogora, Magama, Mariga, Mashegu and Rijau, Salka area.

38	Tsuwadi	Kontogora, Magama, Mariga and Rijau
39	Zarma	Kontogora road.

Source: (filtered from the list of Nigerian languages by *Ethnologue* at <https://www.ethnologue.com/country/ng/languages>)

Table 2: Languages of Niger State ('Miss NYSC Niger State Batch B 2013 transformation campaign')

S/No	Name of language	Location or Local Government Area (LGA) in which spoken
1	Acipa	Eastern Kontagora
2	Acipa,	Western Kontagora
3	Asu	Mariga, several villages south of Kontagora
4	Baangi	Northern Niger State
5	Bariba	
6	Basa-Gumna	(†) Chanchaga LGA
7	Basa-Gurmana	Border of Rafi and Chanchaga, Kafin Gurmana
8	Basa-Kontagora	Mariga, N.E. of Kontagora
9	Bauchi	Rafi and Shiroro
10	Boko	Borgu
11	Busa	Borgu
12	Cinda-Regi-Tiyal	Chanchaga, Rafi and Mariga
13	Cishingini	Borgu and Agwara
14	Dibo	Lapai
15	Fungwa	Rafi
16	Gbagyi	Rafi, Chanchaga, Shiroro, and Suleija
17	Gbari	Chanchaga, Suleija, Agaie, and Lapai
18	Gupa-Abawa	Lapai around Gupa and Edzu villages
19	Gurmana	Shiroro. Gurmana town and nearby hamlets
20	Gwamhi-Wuri	Magama
21	Gwandara	Suleija
22	Hungworo	Rafi
23	Hun-Saare	Rijau
24	Kadara	Chanchaga
25	Kakanda	Agaie and Lapai
26	Kakihum	Northern Niger State
27	Kami	Lapai, Ebo town & 11 villages
28	Laru	Borgu, on the banks of the Niger River
29	Lela	Rijau
30	Lopa	Borgu

31	Nupe-Nupe-Tako	Mariga, Gbako, Agaie, and Lapai
32	Pongu	Rafi
33	Reshe	Borgu, southern Kebbi State
34	Shama-Sambuga	Rafi and Mariga
35	Sorko	
36	Tsikimba	Magama and Mariga, Auna and Wara areas
37	Tsishingini	Magama and Mariga, Salka area
38	Tsivadi	Bangi, Kontagora and Rijau
39	Ujjili	Chanchaga and Suleija, on the road from Minna to Abuja at Kafin Koro
40	Zarma	

Source: https://web.facebook.com/187109924815414/posts/languages-of-niger-statethere-are-38-languages-spoken-as-first-language-in-niger/187407254785681/?_rdc=1&_rdr.

A comparison of the two tables shows that the language, **C'Lela**, recorded in Table 1 at S/No 13 as spoken in Rijau LGA is most probably the same language as the one called **Lela** in Table 2, S/No 29, also spoken in Rijau LGA. The same goes for **Tanjijili** in Table 1 and **Ujjili** in Table 2. It also shows that there are 8 language names recorded in Table 1 which are not seen in Table 2, and that, conversely, there are also 8 language names recorded in Table 2 which are not seen in Table 1.

If we consider the fact that the first language mentioned in Table 2, Acipa, is entered twice, we could conclude that the authors of both lists report the same number of languages, although they agree on the names of only 31 languages. It must be mentioned too that the most widely spoken indigenous language in the State, Hausa, is not mentioned at all in Table 2 list. All this may mean, firstly, that further inquiries will be needed to validate the names, and indeed, the existence, of those languages over which the entries in the two tables are at variance. Secondly, it may also mean that a totally new inquiry will be needed to identify all the languages of Niger State and validate their names. And thirdly, there are, undoubtedly, some minority languages which are not reported in either of the two tables. This is the case, for instance, of Kambari which is spoken in Kontagora, and in which a major translation work is currently being carried out (English into Kambari).

Table 1 is from *Ethnologue*, which must be a reliable document, published by a reputable organisation, SIL International. However, although the information has been taken from *Ethnologue's* twenty-second edition published recently, in February 2019, it is not clear whether full update has been carried out on all the languages concerned.

Further inquiries into the multiplicity of languages in Niger State do not come within the scope of the present study. What is important for us is to note that at least 31 languages are minority languages in Niger State, and that, to all intents and purposes, they are not being used in (formal) education, are probably not used in governance, are probably not being developed or

preserved through writing, research, translation or any activity that can reasonably keep a language alive.

But what are the reasons for not using these languages in education? What are the implications? How is Niger State implementing the national language policy in education?

Implementing the National Language Policy in Niger State

The national language policy in education is a cardinal aspect of the Nigerian Policy on Education (NPE). The NPE was first enunciated in 1977 and has since been revised several times. As stated by Obi (2018, p. 162), “the first edition was published in 1977, the second in 1981, third edition in 1998, fourth and fifth editions in 2004 and 2007 respectively. The current one which is the sixth edition was published in 2013” (p. 162).

In all six editions of the NPE, the fundamental importance of language (and, in particular, Nigerian languages) in education is stressed. According to Okeke (2018), citing Elugbe (1990), “If education is the cornerstone of national development, then Nigerian languages have to be developed so that education may be on a surer footing” (p. 151).

Again, Okeke (2018, p. 151), citing Bambose (1983), stated that: “unless we make our children to learn the basics of modern technology, Science and Mathematics in a language they understand well, the seed of transferred technology will fall on barren ground and fail to germinate.”

In fact, educationists, psychologists and linguists agree that a child receives instruction, acquires knowledge, and absorbs culture best if such culture, knowledge and instruction are imparted to him or her in his or her mother tongue or in the language s/he has acquired in his or her immediate environment. This is the thinking behind Nigeria’s language policy in education. According to Emenanjo (1988), the policy provides for:

- (i) Mother-Tongue (MT) and/or Language of the immediate community (LIC) as the Language of initial literacy at the pre-primary and junior, primary levels, and of adult and non-formal education.
- (ii) The three major (national) Languages - Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba at L2 as the languages of national culture and integration.
- (iii) English - the official language - as the language of formal literacy, the bureaucracy, secondary and higher education, the law courts, etc.
- (iv) Selected foreign languages especially, French, and Arabic, as the languages of international communication and discourse.

This is succinctly captured in the title of Brann’s inaugural lecture (Brann, 1980): ‘Mother tongue, other tongue and further tongue’.

What does all this mean with regard to the implementation of the national language policy in education? A study carried out by the Research and Publication Committee of the School of

Languages, Federal College of Education (FCE), Kontagora, Niger State, titled *An Appraisal of Language Teachers and Materials in Public Senior Secondary Schools in Niger State* (2013), provides a part of the answer to this question.

The findings of the FCE Kontagora study, which include the gross inadequacy of qualified, as well as unqualified teachers and of teaching materials in Niger State, led them to conclude on “the deplorable state of language teaching and learning in public senior secondary schools in Niger State, due to lack of qualified hands and unavailability of teaching and learning materials.”

The FCE Kontagora study was limited to public senior secondary schools in Niger State. It covered English, as the official language of the country, the three major (national) Languages - Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, and Arabic and French, as the selected languages of international communication and discourse. It described as deplorable the state of the teaching and learning of these languages in Niger State.

In fact, our inquiries in all three zones of Niger State, at all levels of education, in relevant languages, from our resource persons who are specialists in some of the major indigenous languages of Niger State, and from relevant departments of the State Government, did not give any less deplorable result than the FCE Kontagora study.

Of the 78 schools visited, Arabic is taught in 22, English in 68, French in 22, Hausa in 31, Gbagyi in none, and Nupe in 6. This means that Hausa (which is the major mother tongue – MT - /language of the immediate community – LIC) is taught in only 39.7 per cent of the institutions visited.

The major reason why schools in Niger State (as everywhere else in the entire Federation) are unable to teach languages fully, as stipulated in the NPE, is the perennial lack of teachers. Even English is not exempt from this shortage of teachers at all levels of education in the whole country. This is what our study this year (2019) in Niger State has discovered. This is what the FCE Kontagora study discovered in 2013. This is also what every research has complained about over the last four decades, as reported by Emenanjo (1988).

Emenanjo (1988) reported that “the total number of teachers required in 1988 for the three major Nigerian languages was 55,237. Only 6,383 or 11% of these were available.”

There is no doubt that the situation has changed somewhat 30 years on. But even now, does the Federal Government, or any State Government, have the money, or the will, to train more teachers, enough teachers, or even to employ available teachers, to help implement this aspect (or any other aspect) of its language policy in education? Available evidence shows that neither the money nor the will is there. This, therefore, is why the Federal Government, as well as the States (including Niger State), are not implementing the language policy in education.

In Niger State Hausa is a major indigenous mother tongue (MT) or language of the immediate community (LIC) for a majority (but not all) of the populations of the State. However, it is not yet possible to have it taught as widely as it might be in implementation of the relevant aspect

of the national policy in education. As mentioned earlier, of the other major languages of Niger State, not one out of the 78 institutions visited by our team in all three zones of the State teaches Gbagyi, and only 6 institutions teach Nupe. If the State cannot provide adequate funding to train teachers for these three major languages, it goes without saying that nothing can be expected to be done any time soon in respect of the 30-odd minority languages.

The implication of all this is that speakers of some of these minority languages (especially those who do not have even Hausa as LIC), might not be getting any education at all. And from our inquiries at the State Ministry of Education, the State Government does not seem to be implementing any specific language policy.

It would be necessary, therefore, for Niger State to formulate, and endeavour to implement, some credible language policy in education, in line with the stipulations in the NPE.

Recommendations have been made to this effect in the past. In 1988, Emenanjo (1988) made the following recommendations (among others):

- 1) There must be committed state involvement and responsibility in implementing the policy. In this regard the National Council on Education should direct ALL states, especially the multilingual ones to identify the distinct languages in their areas and evolve their own language policies for them within the framework of the NPE. Having identified the distinct languages in the states (as Akwa-Ibom, former Bendel, Benue, Niger, Rivers) have done, states should then establish the modalities for:
 - i. training teachers in these languages;
 - ii. developing the languages from oracy to literacy;
 - iii. designing orthographies and other textual materials necessary for the effective teaching and learning of these languages as school subjects;
 - iv. evolving evaluation examination materials for their use in the primary, JSS and later SSS;
 - v. generating and sustaining interest in these languages in the primary schools and JSS.

But nothing seems to have happened in Niger State with regard to the implementation of these recommendations. Thirty years on, the FCE Kontagora research findings proves this.

In 2013, the FCE Kontagora research group made the following recommendations (among others) to the Niger State Government:

- urgent and massive recruitment of Hausa language teachers, as Hausa is supposed to be the language of the immediate environment.

- immediate recruitment of qualified English Language teachers which is grossly inadequate in the Niger State secondary school system as the subject is the gateway for further educational and economic advancement in Nigeria and beyond.

But nothing seems to have been done to implement these recommendations in the State. This is proved by even the partial results of the ongoing study, our study, in the Faculty of Languages and Communication Studies of Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University (IBBU), Lapai, Niger State.

The present study will, therefore, not be making similar bold recommendations which the State Government may not have the means or the will to implement. However, we know that some individuals and groups have been making some efforts to study, codify, write and develop their languages. Emenanjo reported, as far back as 1988, that there is

a qualitative and quantitative increase in texts of all descriptions available in Nigerian languages. Science and Maths books are now available for primary education in the major languages as well as in minority languages such as Gbagyi, Kambari, Kamuku, Nupe (all in Niger State).

Also, late Professor Samuel Kolo Tswana, Professor of English and former Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) of our University, IBBU, Lapai, had told us that the Nupe Language Committee of which he was the Chairman had a collection of manuscripts in both Nupe and English awaiting publication. Other efforts include research carried out by some Nupe scholars as well as by several postgraduate students of the Department of English, Faculty of Languages and Communication Studies, IBBU, Lapai, Niger State. Still others include translations carried out by some Nupe scholars, like Dr Kolo (formerly a lecturer in the College of Education, Minna, Niger State).

With regard to Gbagyi, we are aware that several scholars like Dr Justina Ashituabe (2006, 2012), Dr Shekwolo, Dr Ruth Galadima, have carried out their doctoral research on this language. Dr Ashituabe, who is working with our research group as a resource person, has informed us that a group of scholars who are native speakers of Gbagyi, as herself, are currently working on the promotion of their language.

Hausa is the most developed of the three major indigenous languages of Niger State (Gbagyi, Hausa and Nupe), although it lacks teachers for the needs of schools in the State. We do not know if any research is being carried out on the rest of the indigenous languages of the State classified as minority languages. It is, therefore, mainly in respect of these minority languages that we would like to make some recommendations. (We may note here that the Holy Bible is currently being translated into one of these minority languages, Kambari, in Kontagora, as Professor Yakubu Auna (Provost of College of Education, Minna, formerly Deputy Vice Chasncellor, Administration, IBBU, Lapai) has informed us.)

Recommendations

Based on all the foregoing, we believe that Niger State will be able to operate a credible language policy in education **IF**

- i. the speakers of each of the 30-odd languages of the State **could** become committed to the improvement and promotion of their language through research, codification where necessary, writing (literature, pedagogy, science, technology), translation, etc;
- ii. the State Government **could** set up a body or department in the Ministry of Education (or, better still, in the Governor's office, but drawing its members from relevant Ministries and institutions) to sensitise the speakers of each of these languages on the need to work to preserve their language and upgrade it to a medium of instruction in the schools. Such a body or department would motivate and empower committed researchers and monitor and co-ordinate their activities;
- iii. the premier tertiary institution in the State, IBBU Lapai, which is a State university, **could** set up a standing committee composed of relevant academics (linguists, educationists), possibly strengthened by TETFund grant, to work with the body or department set up in the Governor's office. It **could** invite, and work with, SIL International. (a nonprofit organisation committed to serving language communities worldwide as they build capacity for sustainable language development. It does this primarily through research, translation, training and materials development);
- iv. this body or department **could** help the State Government draw up a schedule or plan, complete with a reasonable time frame, to determine how and when these minority languages can become fully developed and have teachers trained to teach them, and how and when the major languages of the State as well can have more teachers, enough teachers, for all the schools in the State, in short, how and when the State Government could acquire, and begin to implement, its language policy in education creditably.

Conclusion

In this side-line study, which is a preliminary report on our TETFund-sponsored research on 'Language Education and Translation in Niger State', we have sought to identify the many languages spoken in Niger State and discuss their status with regard to the country's national policy in education, as stipulated in the Nigerian Policy on Education (NPE). We found out that, although there is no agreement on the number of languages spoken in the State, more than 30 distinct language communities are spread over the 25 Local Government Areas of the State. We learnt that the State Government does not seem to have any distinct language policy that could inclusively cater for the educational needs of all its populations; that there is a critical shortage of teachers for even the three major indigenous languages of the State (Gbagyi, Hausa and Nupe). We have discussed the plight of the other 30-odd languages and concluded that the speakers of these languages need to be sensitised to become committed to the improvement and promotion of their languages and that the State Government could monitor and co-ordinate the

activities of the speakers and scholars of these languages through a body set up for that purpose, with a view to eventually evolving a language policy in education that it can implement.

This why we have made suggestions requiring the State Government, through a body set up in the Governor's office, the scholars and speakers of the different languages, the State University, IBBU, Lapai, and SIL International to proactively work in concert to evolve a language policy in education that can be implemented in such a way that no individual or community in the State would be denied access to education.

We believe that if all those concerned, including the State Government, work conscientiously towards the common goal, this 'Babel of Niger State', this seemingly intractable conundrum, will be resolved to everybody's satisfaction in the not too distant future.

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ABOUT THE RESEARCH TEAM

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1. Amos A. Ihenacho is a Professor of French and Translation Studies in the Department of French.
2. Aliyu M. Jamiu is a Professor of Arabic in the Department of Arabic.
3. Margaret N. Agu is an Associate Professor of English and current HOD of the Department of English.
4. Simon A. Ebine is a Senior Lecturer in French and current HOD of the Department of French.
5. Samuel Adelabu is a Lecturer in the Department of French.
6. Eucheria F. Obi is a Lecturer in the Department of French.

A seventh person worked with the team while on sabbatical leave in IBBU Lapai:

7. Ahmed Abdusalam, Professor of Arabic and Linguistics, University of Ilorin.

Resource persons:

8. Justina L. Ashituabe (PhD), native speaker of Gbagyi and Lecturer in the Department of English, College of Education, Minna.
9. Fatima Shitu, native speaker of Nupe and former student of the Department of French, IBBU Lapai.