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THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC DILEMMA OF THE ENGLISH
LANGUAGE USERS IN NIGERIA: ISSUES IN SOCIETAL
MULTILINGUALISM

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Abstract

The Nigerian linguistic society is purely pluralistic. Though conflicting records exist about the number of indigenous languages, it is estimated to be about 500. The need for interaction, and the absence of a national language have made it that every Nigerian is either a bilingual or a multilingual. In every multilingual society, there are particular norms and literal codes which are understood by people of the same shared cultural background in spite of the different codes and there is often a prestige given to one language over others either by its functions or status. In using a prestige language like English in Nigeria, speakers despite their level of competence are faced with the dilemma of linguistic choices. They make choices to fit each purpose; these choices are influenced by certain factors. Faced with the myriad of languages, the Nigerian users of English are confronted with the social, psychological and linguistic dilemma of the speech community. The paper therefore examined the sociolinguistics dilemma of the Nigerian users of English vis a viz uncertainty over choice of code and variety, language attitude, challenges with code mixing/code switching and concern over interference.

Key Words: sociolinguistic dilemma, multilingualism, code-mixing/switching, interference, second language user

Introduction

The Nigerian linguistic society is purely pluralistic. There are divergent views about the number of languages in Nigeria. Eka (2000) recorded that there are about 520 indigenous languages in Nigeria with an adopted official language and its variants as well as other foreign languages like French and Arabic used for specific purposes such as trade. Ezenwa-Ohaeto and Akujobi, (2013), Ojeniyi and Aleminu (2013) put the estimate of the languages on record to about five hundred. For Adegbija (1999), there are over 250 nationalities and about 400 languages. Whatever the estimated number of languages, the fact remains that Nigeria is complexly multilingual and the indigenous languages are geographically or ethnically bound. Ezenwa-Ohaeto & Akujobi (2013) opined that this level of language plurality and the unaverred need for human interaction has made it a reality to have a good number of Nigerians who are bilinguals or multilinguals. (Okoh 2006) added that the situation is such where no Nigerian can be accurately identified as a monolingual; they are either bilinguals or multilinguals. However, he noted that bilingualism in Nigeria has no specific combinable set, some are in the indigenous languages while some others combine the indigenous languages and the English language and some others, the English standard variety and its variant.

In this intercourse of language use, there are often times confusion in use, as a result of the speaker's incompetence in the language(s) or societal factors. To some people, these may be seen as a real dilemma where a person reduces his level of interaction to avoid this confusion or he/she code-switches and code-mixes to fill a gap. Mahmudahumi (2013) noted that, one in a multilingual society learns an array of languages but cannot be perfect in all whereas his society may demand of him to know all; his choice of language is expected to reflect the society he represents and which is the social aspect of language. Considering these social demands, the Nigerian users of the English language either as a first or second language has the task of being in line with the expected conditions at the time of use.

It is therefore not surprising to note that the relationship between English and the society has raised variants in usage and a dilemma of expression greased by sociolinguistic factors in a multi-ethnolinguistic society. As Nigeria's official language, it performs more task than the indigenous languages and based on the multi-linguistic nature of Nigeria, it produces social dialects hinged on class, age, gender, etc. (Umera-Okeke, 2017). In this development, we then have many sets of users divided by a sociolinguistic classification.

Aim and Objective

The aim of this paper is to examine the dilemma a lot of Nigerians face because of the societal multilingualism. Other objective is to identify the manifestations of this dilemma.

The Problem

Competing the linguistic sphere with English in Nigeria is the Nigerian Pidgin (NP). Pidgin has become a lingua franca in some parts of Nigeria such as Warri and Sapele. What this means is that English has lost the colour and the taste as handed over by the native speakers. There seem

to be an existing pattern that every Nigerian user of English conforms to. In quite a lot of instances, users exhibit some dependence on their social settings in the deployment of the English language so that structuring or patterning of thought is simply behavioural and does not reflect any contact with the native speaker's style.

The issues, constraints, inadequacies of English as a second Language learners in Nigeria stem from incompetence in the use of English, to making choices from their linguistic repertoire which is pluralistic in nature. The bi/multilingual learner battles with issues relating to the indigenous languages, Nigerian English, Pidgin and conflict in the choice between American and British variety of English. The speaker therefore experiences a dilemma of expression conscious of his incompetence, a near impossible transfer of indigenous linguistic items and the social demands which may be reflected in the social structures transferred to the target language to clearly reflect the society. The reality is that, a Nigerian using the English language as a second language, consciously or unconsciously cannot complete an utterance without a mixture of languages (Code switching and code-mixing) or interferences either due to incompetence or social factors, otherwise known as L1 interference.

Theoretical Underpin: Wide-Spread Multilingualism

Nigeria like many other African countries is characterized by what Wolf (2000) termed 'widespread multilingualism' (In Umera-Okeke, 2017). According to him, widespread multilingualism is "individuals or groups of people who use two or more languages regularly and who often apply the languages they use for different purposes or switch between them in very systematic ways" (Cited in Umera-Okeke, 2017).

The English Language in Nigeria

The English language plays a very important role in the pluralistic Nigeria. The time of its first incursion is not specifically dated but its introduction through trading activities in the coastal area as at the 17th Century, can be used. This first appearance was a Pidgin-based form but was more standardized through missionary activities and colonial experiences.

Many Nigerians agitate for competence in English to the detriment of their indigenous languages with the notion that the English language is better placed and competence in the language attracts respect (Ekpe, 2010). These can attest to the place of English as a prestige language performing many roles and functions in Nigeria. However, there is a problem of form and uses as a result of its contact with the Nigerian languages and Pidgin.

Due to the heterogenous nature and language complexity of Nigeria, adopting a National Language has proven to be a hard nut to crack. The absence of a national language has paved way for the English Language to remain the only acceptable alternative by all as a unifying language. According to Egwuogu (2011, p. 31), the English Language "functions across the world as the language of power and of inclusion and exclusion in participation in global activities." The English Language has enabled Nigeria and her people to participate and join the rest of the world in technology, politics, education etc.

Factors of size of the speaking population and level of codification of the indigenous languages have given some of the languages a prestige over others and this contributes to the creation of bias in usage of some languages over others. Added to this, is the lawful backing given to some languages as official languages to be used alongside the English language. These languages are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (Ekpe, 2010). However, even the recognized indigenous official languages are not used in legislative discussions as prescribed, but their recognition has opened the space for ethnic crises and linguistically, it has contributed to the death of indigenous languages. Many therefore prefer the use of the English language because it bears no ethnic identity. English therefore plays the unifying role as a language of wider communication in Nigeria. According to Elugbe & Omamor (1991), finding itself in a typical multilingual society, English has become instrumental as a unifying tongue.

Although, English language has been adopted as an official language many decades ago in Nigeria, the speakers and learners still face difficulties using it for many reasons (Fatiloro, 2015). Learning and using a foreign language may not be an easy experience due to languages' peculiarities and distinctiveness. No matter the similarities, no two languages are utterly the same. Speakers of English as a second language find it difficult because sudden break from a familiar or known language to a non-familiar one can prove to be difficult, thus various errors ranging from phonetic error, morphological, syntactic, to semantic errors are committed (Fatiloro, 2015). English in Nigeria is therefore faced with obvious challenges of a language used in a second language situation. Some of these problems include: problems of immediate need, for instance, students learn basic grammar at school for the only purpose of passing in the tests and in the examinations and not to face any real-life situation; slangs, pidgin and the indigenous languages fulfil their other needs. Others challenges to English include code-mixing and code-switching, mother tongue interference, faulty application of rules (intralingual), faulty inconsistency in the orthography of English (Akinbode, n.d.).

Sociolinguistic Dilemma of the Second Language Learner in Nigeria

Nigerians always have the task of choosing a language or a variety of the language for every situation especially when interacting with someone from a different speech community. That is, in every interaction, we consider what is appropriate with participants, topic, and location. According to Holmes (2013), the linguistic forms chosen by a speaker is influenced by social context regarding who he is talking to (participants), where he is talking (setting), what he is talking about (topic), and why he is talking (function). As a result, the same message may be expressed differently to different people. She further stated that, the choice of one linguistic form rather than another is a useful tool for non-linguistic information. Choices may involve varieties of a language or quite different languages for every situation, especially, when interacting with someone from a different speech community. That is, in every interaction, we consider what is appropriate with participants, topic, and location. Let us examine some manifestations of the second language learner's dilemma.

1. Challenges of Code-switching and Code-mixing:

Bokamba (cited in Ayeomoni, 2006) defined code-switching as the mixing of words, phrases and sentences from two distinct grammatical systems across sentence boundaries within the same speech context. In other words, it is alternating between two or more languages or language varieties in the context of a single conversation. While code-mixing is defined as the blending or placing of various linguistic units (affixes, words, phrases and clauses) from two different grammatical systems within the same sentence or speech context. Code-switching is inter-sentential where the switch occurs at sentence or clause boundaries. For instance, one can switch from the native language to English or from English language to pidgin in response to social needs. Speakers of the English language alongside any other indigenous language tend to switch from one language to another due to the existence of these languages in their linguistic repertoires. This is consciously and unconsciously done. As a matter of fact, people use code-switching or code-mixing for various reasons.

Code switching and code mixing are features of the Nigerian linguistic landscape and a common phenomenon among Nigerian users of the English language because of the linguistic repertoire available to them. It is therefore not out of place to hear such utterances as:

- *Nyem* a glass of water *biko* (Igbo/English)
- Just few people *mere* attend the programme
- I think you *dey* hear *abi*? (English/Nigerian Pidgin/Yoruba)
- I just *dey waka pass* (English/Nigerian Pidgin).
- *I bin talk am ee. Nsogbu dikwa*, but all is good and well, let's watch and see. (Nigerian Pidgin/Igbo/English)

The above sentences are composed of fragments of alternating codes which are grammatical in their source language.

Holmes (1996) has identified several different reasons of people doing code-switching. According to him, *participants*, *solidarity* and *status* will influence the speakers to switch code within a social situation. For example, with the arrival of a new participant, whom a speaker has been familiar with, to show a solidarity they greet each other with different code from the previous one. Frequently, code-switching shows us the speakers' relationship and shared-cultural background.

- *Nnaa kedu ka I mere?* (How are you?) How come you are late? *O tego anyi bidoro* (It's been long we started)

Then, *topic* also gives chance for speakers to switch code. When an English as a second language learner uses English language on a certain topic, and gets stuck in expressing a certain word or utterance, the person will automatically switch and change his/her own expression, which might be more appropriate, such as a proverb or specific terms.

- The proverbial *enekentioba* said that since children have learnt to shoot without missing, it has learnt to fly without perching

The above view is supported by Eltridge (1996), who in his research in a Turkish secondary school found that students' motivations in doing code-switching are mostly due to the *lexical deficit* and *floor-holding* mechanism.

Sometimes, code-switching also can express *affective meaning*, as Holmes stated (p.45-46). This function is to articulate emotional feeling towards the interlocutor, just a kind of comfort.

Ouma (2014) identified the challenges of code mixing to include inconsistency in language mastery, poor spelling skills, syntactic jargon, ambiguities and semantic intolerance. When people code-mix, they tend to fill gaps in their lexical knowledge with words from the first language (L₁) and so put less effort in searching for the right word in the target language. The first language offers an escape route and with time, the person stops making any effort in acquiring the full knowledge of the target language as it seems he has an alternative offered by the L₁.

Code-mixing/switching also results in ambiguities. When two languages are mixed, meaning may not be easily established as the codes employed present varied approaches to the meaning being presented by the speaker.

Syntactically, code-mixing/switching gives rise to word order differences and mismatches in grammatical categories. Overall, they affect competence and performance among Nigerian users of English

2. Nigerian English Intrusion

Nigerian variety of English is marked by inadequate attention to details in the use of English such as omission of articles and particles. Unconsciously, the Standard British English rendered by a lot of Nigerians is smeared with this error. Sometimes, in place of these items, Nigerians substitute items that they consider fit or in fact, correct. Examples include:

- Tell the guard to ***be at alert***. (instead of ***be on alert***)
- They were all killed ***day before yesterday***. (killed ***the*** day before)
- A bird in hand is worth two on the bush. (***in*** the hand)
- The computer will ***enable you work*** more efficiently. (enable you ***to*** work)
- Go and on the gen (put on the generator)

The speaker needs to pay attention to those tiny grammatical elements or items because without them, those thoughts are incomplete thereby limiting or hindering the speaker of a global acceptance (Igoanusi, 2008).

3. L₁ Interference

Interference is the result of the influence of first language in the process of acquiring a new language which can affect the bilingual communicators' competence use the acquired language

effectively. Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) explained interference as “the trace left by someone’s native language upon the foreign language he/she has acquired” (p. 78), while Brown (2008) described it as “the interfering effects of the native language on the target (the second).” He further opined that “adult second language linguistic processes are more vulnerable to the effects of the first language on the second (p. 102). These barriers can invariably affect the speaker’s grammatical, lexical and phonological competence. Mackey (cited in Ukwuezeh, 2008) argued that a person who has been exposed to a particular language from childhood has habits and thoughts which are closely tied to the language which forms part of his experience. He further asserted that in learning a second language, the learner has to adjust his speech habits to accommodate those of the target language. Many Nigerian users of English as second language are unable to successfully make this adjustment. They simply transfer the features of their mother tongue to the English language.

These transfers could occur at the phonological, grammatical or lexical levels as illustrated below:

Phonological interference/transfer is applicable to both the use of the consonant sounds and vowel sounds. Some of these sounds are absent in the native languages, it poses problems of pronunciation for the L₂ learner, for instance, the central vowels are absent in the Nigerian languages so they are approximated to sounds in the L₁. Thus, the sounds /ɜ:/, ə, ʌ/ are approximated to /e/ and /ɒ/. A typical Igbo speaker of English will pronounce the following

Blood	/blɒd/	for	blʌd/
Supply	/sɒplai/	for	/sʌplai/
Gun	/gɒnu/	for	/gʌn/
Earth	/et/	for	/ɜ:ˈθ/

Other pronunciation errors include the pronunciation of

fis for fish

ed for head

fiful for people

A typical Ijaw man finds it difficult to pronounce the post- alveolar fricative /ʃ/ and therefore approximates it to the alveolar fricative /s/ as in ‘*fis*’ instead of fish because the sound is lacking in his mother tongue. The glottal sound /h/ occurring at word-initial position is also a challenge to a Yoruba user of English language and when faced with such a situation, he simply deletes the sound. Again, an average Hausa man has a problem distinguishing between the bilabial plosive /p/ and the labiodental fricative /f/.

Syntactically too, one frequently hears such constructions as:

- *I am coming* (a direct translation of *a na m abija*) for *I will be right back*

- *Are you hearing me? (inaanu?) for Do you understand?*
- *I can hear a smell (a na m anu isi) for I perceive a smell*

In the light of these interferences, the Nigerian users of English are frequently faced with the challenges of mispronunciation, misspellings and wrong sentence formations.

Other kinds of interference are replicated in the examples below:

- *The novel is **sweet** (interesting) – (lexical interference)*
- *I have put money on her head (paid her pride price) – (lexical interference).*
- *This matter is paining me. (syntactic interference)*
- *Do not frown your face. (syntactic interference)*

Ghani, Ataman and Egele, (2012, p. 31), has attributed the above challenge to several factors namely, social and environmental factors.

4. Uncertainty Over Choice of Code and Variety of a Code

A code can be described as a language or a variety of language. Wardhaugh (1986) defined it as any kind of system that two or more people employ for communication. It also refers to any system used by a single person specifically devised to protect certain secrets. Sociolinguistic research has however made it clear that to communicate successfully in a language other than your own, it is not enough to learn the phonology, grammar and vocabulary of that language. You also have to learn how to use it appropriately in particular social situations according to the norms employed and accepted by its native speakers (Mahmudahumi, 2013).

Generally, people in multilingual settings are not simply inclined to speak one language over the other; they make such choices consciously and deliberately. In choosing a code, they consider the social context or domain of use such as the time and place of communication, the occasion, the relationship between them and the hearer (s) as well as the topic under discussion. This is because each domain has its appropriate code and the ability to use the right code in the right domain determines whether one is linguistically competent or not. Nigerians are constantly faced with the task of determining the appropriate code to use at any given situation—whether English (or its varieties of NE and NP) or the indigenous languages (major or minor indigenous languages). Given this situation, an average Nigerian can be described as a linguistic ‘chameleon’, and a jack of all trade but a master of none. A speaker may feel that the use of a particular variety will place him in an advantageous position either within a group or within a wider social context. Therefore, the dilemma of language choice becomes dominant and inevitable as people have reasons to change codes and varieties in a multilingual society like Nigeria.

Nigeria was colonised by Britain and thus, the British variety was enthroned as the official language. Unfortunately, today, Nigerian users are at a dilemma of usage. People speak and write American variety instead of the British variety. Examples are in the use of the following American terms: *Antenna (aerial), bill (bank note), telephone booth (call box), sick (ill),*

kerosene (paraffin), rest room (public toilet), store (shop), the movies (the cinema). The British versions of the words are enclosed in parenthesis. Other examples are confusions in spellings such as in the spelling of *program* instead of *programme*; *center* instead of *centre*; *colonize* instead of *colonise*; *neighbor, behavior, analog, pediatrics* instead of *neighbour, behaviour, and analogue and paediatrics* respectively.

5. The Dilemma of Expressing a Nigerian User's World View

Every language reflects the culture of its people. Culture was defined as “shared beliefs, values and behaviours of a social group” (Byram, 2008). For Kramsch (2009), language expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality. Which cultural reality for Nigerians faced with the dilemma of expressing their world view through multiple languages? How does the Nigerian user of English express his belief in a language that is not culturally woven to his traditions? How would he make incantations in an alien tongue? This dilemma is reflected in what the Igbos express when they revert to their indigenous language in breaking the cola which is their basic cultural practice. We need to recognize that language choices do not exist in a vacuum. Language is, after all, a medium for interaction and communication between people, and the use of language will reflect the infinite complexity of human relationships.

6. The Shifting Identity

Tied to the issue of culture is language and identity. Language showcases identity? Which identity for Nigerians? A lot of Nigerians in Urban cities prefer the use of English language to their indigenous languages. They view the English language as a language of prestige Today in Nigeria, English is gradually becoming the first language of a lot of children in urban areas. This of course is to the detriment of the indigenous language. Ekwensi Observed:

To this segment of our society, the middle class, English is no longer an alien language. It seems to me that when speaking your native language becomes a conscious activity, it has lost its premier position to another which comes more easily and naturally to your lips. The urban middle-class dwellers and others though less affluent but who are also urban dwellers have thus become speakers of some form of English language in preference to their native language. (Cited in Emenyonu 1992, p. 23).

Also, Egbe (2004, p. 41) opined that:

... the younger generation of Ejagham speakers hardly knows (sic) any proverbs at all in the language.... While speaking, instead of using an Ejagham proverb an English equivalent of it is used... the consequences are that in future an Ejagham person may never know or use a proverb while speaking in Ejagham since the older generation that now uses them may have passed away”.

While some Nigerians saw nothing wrong with the trend, others condemned it. Bamgbose (1992) believed we should all strive to be associated with English. He stated thus:

...what is better than being associated with a language that opens up limitless possibilities for international communication?... the more we use the English language the more we imbibe values associated with the language. No one will deny the usefulness of English for international communication, education and academic discourse (Cited in Okoh, 2006, p. 259)

On the contrary, Achebe (1975) condemning this trend stated:

The real question is not whether Africans could write in English but whether they ought to. Is it right that a man should abandon his mother-tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling (p.62).

7. Language Attitude

Linked to the issue of identity is language attitude shows the users' disposition towards languages. The disposition could be negative, positive, ambivalent or lackadaisical, depending on social, psychological, historical and political factors associated with the languages (Obi, 2014). This implies that one's overall attitude to any particular language determines the frequency of use, the determination to acquire same and the desire to be competent in it. Okoh (2012) argued that the difficulty encountered by learners in the study of the English language is borne out of the wrong attitude towards learning which is manifest in either laziness or unwillingness to accept change. In his word:

To approach language with the common *it-doesn't matter* attitude is to make no progress at all. It is sad to hear people, even teachers, unable to differentiate between such as simple pair as *ask/axe*, end up saying "I want to *axe* a question, or "Tank you *very much* or even declaring: what does it matter how I pronounce *category, favourite, biblical, Senate, palace or divorce?* (p.72).

The level at which one attains proficiency in a particular language is linked to one's attitude towards learning the language. In Nigeria, although English is the official language (and even fast becoming the first language), promoted by the government's language policy, freely spoken even in homes and preferred above the indigenous languages because of the prestige accorded to it, proficiency in the language is still very low mainly due to the apathy towards learning in general. The result is that Nigerians are neither competent in their local languages or in the English language especially in terms of accuracy and the grammatical use of the language.

Conclusion

In discussing the dilemma of the Nigerian user of English termed the dilemma of expression in this work, the Nigerian user's level of competence and the social prestige given the language as well as the demand for its use over the indigenous languages have created a sociolinguistic dilemma. It becomes a hard puzzle to fill, trying to develop his linguistic competence and use the language to represent his worldview since language is a social product imbued with linguistic and socio-cultural features clearly reflected in every speech.

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