The functions of English in Nigeria from the earliest times to the present day

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Nigeria has one of the largest English-speaking populations, but the function of the language has evolved over the years

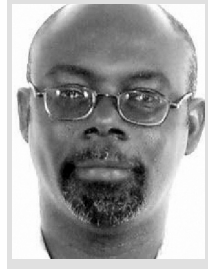
The origins of English in Nigeria

The use of the English language in Nigeria dates back to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century when British merchants and Christian missionaries settled in the coastal towns called Badagry, near Lagos in the present day South Western Nigeria and Calabar, a town in the present day South Eastern Nigeria. The merchants initially traded in slaves until the slave trade was abolished in 1807, at which time freed slaves of Nigerian origin returned to the country. Many of them, who had been exposed to Western education and Christianity, later served as translators or interpreters for the Christian missionaries. The primary aim of the Christian mission was not to make their converts speak English; rather, it was to make them literate enough to read the bible in their indigenous languages. This must be the reason why Samuel Ajayi Crowder translated the English bible into Yoruba, the major language in South Western Nigeria.[1]

Later, when the British colonised Nigeria, their language automatically became the language of administration. This, coupled with missionary activities in the coastal towns, such as the establishment of schools in which they trained their converts to become catechists and teachers in the missions, established the language in Nigeria. The colonial government also began to establish schools to meet the growing demand for western education.

It was recorded that as long ago as the early eighteenth century, King Enyamba of Duke Town in the coastal area had journals in which he recorded the events of the state in (good) English. Also, the Efik of Old Calabar accommodated to European civilisation. They had schools for their children and some very wealthy ones among them sent their children to England to learn elementary book keeping to aid their business. It was also reported that most Efik chiefs then had anglicised names (Akindele and Adegbite, 1999:15).

From all indications, the learning of English in the earliest times was mainly through an informal system, since there existed very few schools. The language then was limited to interactions between the white colonial masters, the missionaries and a few people in the coastal towns who had business with them,



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such as teachers, catechists, servants (cooks and guards), some Christian converts, traders and clerks working with the colonial government. Hence English during this period was purely an instrumental language, whose function was limited to communication between the indigenes and the British. This period however marked the beginning of interest of the people in the language as they saw it as a marker of status.

After the Berlin Conference of 1884, Africa was partitioned among the world powers and colonisation became formalised. There was also a growth in missionary activities. The missionaries built more schools and encouraged parents to send their children to these schools. Sometimes, these children had to be induced with gifts and parents demanded money for allowing their children to go to school (Taiwo, 1980:7). So, the gradual implantation of English education in Nigeria was done through the missionaries, clerks, catechists and pastors.

With colonialism, the English language gained wider functions. It not only became the language of the colonial administration, it also became a school subject, the language of instruction in the higher primary school level and a language of prestige, when compared with the indigenous languages.

In 1882, the British colonial government established an act that brought education under government control and made English the language of instruction in schools, thereby promoting an assimilationist culture. Reactions of people to this act differed. In the South West, it was opposed as some critics expressed their dissatisfaction to the growing prestige of English over the local languages. One such criticism was expressed in *Lagos Times*, quoted in Awonusi (2004:49), which commented that 'instances were not wanting of converts educated in England who, on coming back to Nigeria pretended that they did not understand the vernacular and when spoken to spoke through interpreters.'

Another reaction to the growing prestige of English in the South West was the publication of journals and religious literature in the vernacular languages – for instance, in 1882, *Iwe Irohin*, a newspaper in Yoruba medium, was established. However in Calabar region, it was reported that students were withdrawn from schools when the colonial administration tried to introduce the study of indigenous languages. To them, the hallmark of education was the ability to communicate in English (Awonusi, 2004:49).

In response to the reaction of the South West critics to the 1882 act, the government brought in another act in 1887, which allowed the indigenous languages to compete with English. Meanwhile, many of the local languages were developing their own grammar books, literature, and dictionaries for teaching.

By the end of the nineteenth century, despite the influence of missionaries and colonialists in what is now known as Nigeria, most mission schools remained concentrated in the South West and South East. The North did not open up for missionary activities in the same way as the South. The feelings in the North were that Christianity had nothing to offer society, which had its own monotheistic religion and formal education (Adetugbo, 1979:95). With this attitude in the North, western education did not start gaining much influence until the early twentieth century when the Church Missionary Society (CMS) established schools in Loko and Bida.

During the colonial period, the functions of English in the South had expanded beyond the limits of being an instrument for relating with the colonialists and missionaries to being a major means of communication in government offices and schools. In the North, English usage was restricted to educating the children of the Hausa/Fulani feudal class.

In 1914, the protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria were amalgamated, as a result of the desire of the colonial government for a convenient administration of the two contiguous territories. The amalgamation however was later to saddle post-colonial Nigeria with an existentialist crisis – which continues to undermine the Nigerian state. The northern territories largely identified with a wider Arabo-Islamic world and ignored the southern nationalist potentates during the struggle for independence in the late 1950s.[2]

After 1914, the use of English became more firmly implanted in the new country. It then assumed the status of the language of nationalism, uniting the linguistically heterogeneous country. English also found relevance in the media, as many newspapers which used English as their medium sprang up in Southern Nigeria. They include *The Lagos Weekly Record*, *The Lagos Observer*, *The Times of Nigeria*, *West African Pilot* and so forth. With the popularisation of western education in the south, many of

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the elites became critics of the colonial administration. This marked the beginning of agitation for self-rule.

The 1954 Constitution, Article 114 (i) recognised the difference in the attitudes of the north and the south to English and recommended the use of English as the language of the national assembly and the regional assemblies of the West and East. It recommended Hausa as the language of business in the northern house of assembly. This shows clearly that English had different functions during the late colonial period in the north and the south. While in Southern Nigeria, English had pervaded the major public domains, in the North, the language had limited functions in the public domain. It is however clear that English played a major role in the agitation for independence, which finally became a reality on October 1st 1960.

Functions of English in post-independence Nigeria

With the attainment of independence, English gradually grew to become the major medium for inter-ethnic communication. Like most African nations, the country, after independence, had to grapple with multi-ethnicity and acute multilingualism. In this section, we shall examine the expansion in the functions of English during the post-colonial period.

In Education, English during the post-colonial period was not merely a school subject: it became a core subject at every level of education – from the primary school to the tertiary level. A credit pass in English is now mandatory for candidates to gain admission into higher institutions. It is also mandatory for all first year students in higher institutions to undertake a course in the 'Use of English' and pass the course before they can graduate. Most universities also teach English for Specific Purposes. English also became the lingua franca for students of tertiary institutions from the different parts of the country.

The *National Policy on Education* (NPE) 1977, revised in 1981 and 2004, clearly spelt out the role of English as a school subject in the first three years of primary education[3] and as the language of instruction from the fourth year in the primary school.[4] It also stipulates that every child should be made to study English and any two Nigerian languages other than that of the environment in the junior secondary school. In the senior secondary school, a child is expected to study English and one Nigerian language other than that of the environment.[5]

In relation to education is the function of English as the major language for creative writing in Nigeria. English is the major language used by creative writers for expressing their protest against all forms of injustices and promoting the indigenous cultures of the people to the outside world. Nigerian literature in English is now read all over the world and many of them have been translated into other languages. This function of using English to express the uniquely Nigerian socio-cultural experience in oral and written literature is not limited to those who are very competent in the language. Even those with limited competence like Amos Tutuola managed to write literary works, which have received enough attention from readers and critics.[6] The theme of the earliest fictionalised Nigerian literary works, such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease, Arrow of God*, T. M. Aluko's *One Man, One Wife,* and *One Man, One Matchet* was protest and conflict. Other works that came later focused on post-colonial experiences, such as the disappointments experienced by the people after Nigerian leaders took over power from the British colonial masters. Examples are Chinua Achebe's *A Man of The People*, Wole Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi*, and so forth. These writers (according to Walter 2007) use English as a language of 'mutual communication' between Nigerians and the reading populace at large. Chinua Achebe himself reacting to his critics on his use of English as his medium asserts that English undoubtedly must serve as a unifying, national language of literature, despite its primarily colonial inception in Nigeria. It should not lose its value as a medium of international exchange (Achebe, 1965). It should be noted that in most of these literary works, the writers demonstrate their linguistic and dialectical dexterity. For instance, For instance, O'Mole (1987:390) noted that Wole Soyinka in *The Trials of Brother Jero* provides instances of code switching and mixing. He also used a wide spectrum of linguistic varieties, such as English, Yoruba, Nigerian Pidgin English and non-standard English.

Several Nigerian writers have won laurels for their literary works. They include Wole Soyinka, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986; Chinua Achebe who was

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announced as the winner of the Man Booker International Prize in honour of his literary career in June, 2007. There is also emerging a new group of literary writers whose works have won international prizes. They include: Niyi Osundare, a poet, whose poem 'The Eye of The Earth' won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize; Hellon Habila, who won the Caine Prize for African Literature (short stories) in 2001; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, whose novel *Half a Yellow Sun* won the Orange Prize for Fiction.

In contemporary times, especially from the late 1990s, there has been a tremendous growth in the Nigerian film industry, which has been reeling out what are popularly referred to as 'home videos' produced in English. 'Nollywood', as the film industry is sometimes described, produces films that portray Nigerian socio-cultural life. These films are not only popular in the country, but also reach Nigerians and other people in the Diaspora. In addition to video and films, soaps are also produced and featured regularly on the local televisions and radios.

The function of English as the tool for disseminating news has assumed a new dimension in the post-independence Nigeria. In the electronic media, English remains the most widely used language for newscast, advertisement, news reporting, documentary, discussion programmes, talk shows, phone in programmes, and so forth. The Nigerian Pidgin, a debased form of Nigerian English, is particularly employed in the media to bridge the communication gap among Nigerians. For instance, it is used for newscast, news reporting, and advertisement. Nigerian Pidgin has become the major tool used by government agencies for their advertisements. For instance agencies like the National Agency for Food, Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), National Orientation Agency (NOA), National Agency for the Control of AIDS (NACA) use Nigerian Pidgin mostly for their advertisements. This is to help them to reach a larger Nigerian audience. The language is gradually taking over the major functions of English as it is used across different domains in the country.

English has also gained acceptance as the tool in the music industry. In post-colonial Nigeria, several Nigerian musicians portray their messages in the different varieties of the language that exist in the country – ranging from Pidgin to standard Nigerian English. The use of English is not limited to those who sing Western-oriented music, such as pop, blues and soul, it is also becoming a phenomenon among those who sing purely African oriented brands of music, such as juju, apala and fuji. Such musicians include King Sunny Ade, a juju musician, Late Haruna Ishola, an apala musician, Wasiu Ayinde Marshall, a fuji musician. These musicians have taken their brand of music beyond the shores of Nigeria to the Western world, hence the need for them to sing in English to reach a wider audience.

English in the post-colonial Nigeria performs a major role in religion, particularly in the Christian religion. With the advent of Pentecostalism in the 1970s, there was an upsurge of English-speaking churches in the country. From the 1980s, to the new millennium, the number of such churches has grown tremendously. Even though there are still churches that use predominantly the local languages, most churches interpret their messages in English to enable them to reach a wider congregation. Most young Nigerian Christians feel more comfortable worshipping in predominantly English-speaking churches. With this development, a lot of the orthodox churches, which erstwhile conducted their services in the local languages, realising that they were losing their youths to the new Pentecostal churches, have started youth churches, where English is the language of worship. This is a great departure from the functions of English in religion in the colonial period, when the missionaries and colonial government encouraged the use of indigenous languages in worship.

The influence English has had on the practice of Christian religion has not extended to Islam, another major religion in the country. Islam has its language of worship, which is Arabic. Though a few elites among the Moslems conduct part of their worship, such as the sermon, in English, the religion is clearly patterned to be conducted using Arabic, the language of the Holy Quran. The indigenous languages are still functional in traditional religions. This is solely because the adherents are mostly illiterates. Though a few educated people try to project the traditional religions, they would not see any reason for the worship to be conducted in English because the beauty of traditional religion is seen in the use of the indigenous languages. Moreover, English cannot capture the totality of the experience of the traditional religious groups.

English plays a major role in politics, since it

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has been recognised as the country's official language. The Constitution of the country and other official statutes are written in English. The Nigerian Constitution recognises English as well as Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba languages as the languages of business in the federal legislative houses. It also recognises English and any other languages spoken in the state.[7] Most political campaigns are done in English and these include rallies, newspaper, radio and television adverts.

English is also the major medium for transacting businesses, especially in the urban areas. It is the language of banking and the economic sector. People who are not proficient in English use the Nigerian Pidgin in transaction. The function of pidgin for business transaction dated back to the early contact of the Europeans with West Africa in the mid fifteenth century. The language particularly thrived in the coastal towns, where the Portuguese traded with the people. The language though evolved as a trade language and survived through colonisation to the post-colonial period. In the present day Nigeria, it is the variety of English that is most widely used to bridge the communication gap among the Nigerians, particularly between the literate competent users of English and the non-literate/semi-literate incompetent users of English. Pidgin is not only limited in function to commerce. It is also well employed by Nigerian musicians. The late Afro beat musician Fela Anikulapo-Kuti popularised the use of Pidgin as a medium for passing across his message in songs. His songs focused mainly on oppression, corruption and all forms of social injustice in the Nigerian system. Several other artistes later took after him. Pidgin was also employed by some Nigerian writers to project their message. Such writers include the late Mamman Vatsa, a poet, Tunde Fatunde, a playwright, Late Ken Saro Wiwa, and so on.

English in contemporary Nigeria also performs the function of social identity. The Nigerian society, just like any other society, can be divided into various social groups based on profession, wealth, education, political status and so forth. According to Omoniyi (2004: 103), proficiency levels in English can be speculated for members of different professional groups like lawyers, lecturers, doctors, accountants, and so forth. There are schools and clubs for the elites, and proficiency in English is one of the symbols of such groups. A lot of children who grow up in educated homes speak English as early as they start to speak because the learning of English is reinforced by their environment. The acquisition of English at tender ages did not become widespread until the 1980s. In the 1960s and 1970s, many children in educated homes learnt English in school but spoke the local languages at home. With the liberalisation of education, many private schools started springing up in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In contemporary Nigerian society, most educated parents (and even some uneducated ones) would prefer to send their children to private schools since most public schools are not well run. In the private schools, the use of English is encouraged from age two when the child starts schooling. Though English remains the second language for many educated Nigerians, *Wikipedia Free Dictionary* reports that about 4 million Nigerians use English as their first language. These are the people who grow up in reserved areas of the cities, such as the Government Reservation Areas (GRAs) and government official quarters, where English is the predominantly used language for interpersonal communication.

The functions of English in the post-colonial period have assumed another dimension completely different from that of the colonial era. This is made possible by its wider use as an institutionalised variety, which makes Nigerians adapt it to function in most domains of language use. Its use is no longer restricted to the educated Nigerians, even the uneducated make efforts to use it. It remains the only relevant language that allows Nigerians to participate in the contemporary social process within and outside the country.

Functions of English in relation to Nigerian languages

A diachronic discussion of the functions of English in Nigeria will not be complete if we fail to mention how the language functions in relation to the indigenous Nigerian languages. Nigeria is a multilingual setting, so English operates side by side with several indigenous languages. It is not exactly clear how many languages are spoken in Nigeria, but the number of languages listed for Nigeria by *Ethnologue*, a database of language resources, is 521.[8] It had earlier been noted that in spite of the overbearing influence of English, it shares a wide range of functions with some highly codified Nigerian languages,

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such as the major languages in the different regions in the country.

The contact between Nigerian languages and English has had some effects on both languages. The most widely reported is the phenomenon of interference, which describes how the indigenous languages affect the performance of Nigerian speakers of English. Interference cuts across the different linguistic levels, such as syntax, semantics, pragmatics and phonological. The features of interference characterise the variety popularly referred to today as Nigerian English and a lot of scholars have worked on this variety, looking at its features.

Apart from interference, another phenomenon produced by this variety mixing contact is code-switching and mixing. English words, phrases and sentences are mixed with the local languages in such an indiscriminate way, especially in informal conversation. The situation is such that some English words are permanently features of bilingual communication. For instance, most Yoruba-English bilinguals will find it difficult to use the Yoruba equivalents of the following words: *church, table, scissors, wire, change, photo*, and so forth. Even among the uneducated, the best that can be done will be to pronounce such words with strong Yoruba accent, as many of such words have become assimilated to the phonological structure of Yoruba.

The idea of incorporating the local languages into English or vice versa is not limited to speech situation. It is also common among contemporary musicians – hip hop and even musicians who sing in local languages. This is also becoming a feature of gospel music and worship songs in churches. An example can be found in one of the popular Christian worship songs: *I just want to say Baba o, e see* (*I just want to say father, thank you*) (see Taiwo, 2008:16).

English usage continues to pervade the entire Nigerian society at the expense of the indigenous languages. This is particularly true of the situation in Nigerian major cities, state capitals and major towns. The emergence of private schools has further helped to relegate the local languages to some very restricted domains such as the home. Even in most educated homes, English is the medium of interaction. Many Nigerians, particularly foremost educationists, have expressed concern over this growing culture of English usage, particularly as the medium of instruction in the early childhood education. They believe, like other language experts, that the best medium for educating a child in the early formative years is the mother tongue. Babs Fafunwa, a foremost educationist and a professor, did not only defend this idea, he also experimented it with the Ife Six-Year Primary Project (SYPP) at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), Institute of Education, between January 1970 and 1989. The primary objective of the project was to develop a coherent primary education that would use the mother tongue as the medium of instruction. With this, he and other scholars in the team believe the child would benefit cognitively, socially, culturally and linguistically through the use of his/her mother tongue as the language of instruction throughout primary school.[9] Though the *National Policy on Education* stipulates that a child should be educated for the first three years in his/her mother tongue, or the language of immediate environment, this has remained a mirage as parents and some educational authorities do not seem to accept it.

Linguists and indigenous language scholars have been working hard to develop the indigenous languages since one of the major reasons people give in objecting to the use of local languages in education is the fact that they are not developed enough to express most concepts that need to be taught in schools. A lot of grammar and literature books are being written to popularise the learning of the local languages. Many of the major official documents are being translated into the major languages. Some state governments have also been encouraging the use of Nigerian languages. For instance, in Ogun State, the legislators have set apart a day in the week to conduct their business in Yoruba, the major language in the South West. The media is also encouraging the use of the indigenous languages, as some radio and television stations now use the languages for their various programmes. For instance, in Ile-Ife, an ancient town in south-western Nigeria, which is also regarded as the cradle of the Yoruba race, there is a radio station called *Orisun F.M.* which transmits all its programmes only in Yoruba. Likewise, newspapers published in indigenous languages are springing up daily. Newspapers have been published in indigenous languages since the mid 19th century. The first to be published was *Iwe Irohin Yoruba fun Awon Ara Egba at Yoruba*. It was published in 1859. In the post independence Nigeria,

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several other newspapers in indigenous languages sprang up. They include: *Gaskiya tafi Kwabo* in Hausa, *Irohin Yoruba* in Yoruba, *Udoka* in Igbo. In contemporary times we have indigenous newspapers such as *Alaroye, Akuko Iwa, Gaskiya Ta fi Kwabo,* and so forth. The Linguistic Association of Nigeria in recent times has focused on the codification and development of Nigerian languages at its annual conferences and many higher institutions in the country have departments where one Nigerian language or the other is studied. In spite of all these efforts to create awareness in the indigenous languages, English continues to be the preferred choice in many domains.

As many scholars have noted, globalisation has further helped English to spread across the globe and assume more functions. In Nigeria, the growth in the use of the new media – the Internet, mobile phones and satellite television – has further helped to popularise the use of English among the young educated Nigerians. The question that has been agitating the minds of some people is: with the growth in the influence of English, what is the future of Nigerian languages? Taiwo (2004) expresses concern over the lack of intergenerational transfer of the local languages, as English has taken over in most domains. As much as these languages are being developed, they do not seem to find relevance among the young Nigerians, who should naturally project their use.

Conclusion

The functions of the English language in Nigeria keep changing as it becomes more popular. The language started initially with a limited function, first as a medium of interaction between the few educated people and the colonial officers and the missionaries and later, as the language of the elites. Now, it has grown to become the second language of educated Nigerians and even the first language of some Nigerians. Its pidginised form is also a popular medium of expression in the country. In contemporary Nigeria, English functions as the medium of expression in most major domains of language use, such as in politics, religion, education, entertainment, the media, commerce, and so forth. From the foregoing, one can predict from the intergenerational transfer rates of the local languages that for some time to come, English will continue to be the most widely used language in Nigeria. The local languages will continue to develop, but they will be limited in function to mostly private use. ■

Notes

1 Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowder was a Yoruba slave who was liberated after the abolition of the slave trade. He was educated by the Church Missionary Society (CMC) and ordained as a priest. He later rose to become the first African bishop.
2 Ebeonu, Uchenu Moses '1914 and Nigeria's Existential Crisis: A Historical Perspective (2)' Retrieved from: http://www.nigeriavillagesquare1.com/Articles/ebe_ochonu4.html
3 *National Policy on Education* (Lagos: NERDC), 2004, Section 4, 19 (e).
4 *National Policy on Education* (Lagos: NERDC), 2004, Section 4, 19 (f).
5 *National Policy on Education* (Lagos :NERDC), 2004, Section 5, 24 (a) and 25 (a).
6 Amos Tutuola had little formal education, but he was able to write in an English that was not polished or sophisticated. Two of his popular works are *The Palmwine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, both published in 1952.
7 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 Sections 55 and 97.
8 There is no agreement on the number of languages spoken in Nigeria among language scholars. The figure is believed to range between 350 and 500. However, Ethnologue puts the number at 521. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=NG Retrieved 16 June, 2007.
9 The experiment on Education in mother tongue primary research project took place in Ile-Ife in the early 1970 and it was reported to be a success, confirming that children grasp the concepts better when taught in the mother tongue.

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