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LINGUISTIC ISSUE IN NIGERIA'S SOCIO-POLITICAL ECONOMY

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Abstract

This paper examines the challenges facing the survival and preservation of indigenous languages in Nigeria, with particular focus on the Igbo language. Against the backdrop of Nigeria's vast linguistic diversity, it highlights the growing threat of language extinction driven by factors of *lingua franca*, urbanization, and sociocultural attitudes that privilege foreign languages over native ones. Drawing on historical suppression and loss, the study demonstrates how similar patterns are unfolding in Nigeria, where both institutional practices and parental choices contribute to the erosion of indigenous languages. The paper underscores the intrinsic link between language, culture, and identity, arguing that the decline of a mother tongue entails a corresponding loss of cultural heritage and communal consciousness. It raises critical questions about the need for deliberate preservation efforts, including possible language policies and restrictions aimed at safeguarding indigenous languages within their native regions. Furthermore, it explores the implications of migration and the phenomenon of unilateral bilingualism among Igbo speakers, questioning whether linguistic adaptation in non-native regions warrants some form of cultural or social compensation. The study ultimately calls for a reassessment of language priorities and the development of strategies to ensure the continuity and vitality of indigenous languages in Nigeria.

Keywords: Lingusitic issues, Nigeria, socio-political, economy, and culture.

INTRODUCTION

The New. Encyclopedia Britannica states that over 100 languages are spoken in Nigeria, certain documents put-it at about 250. The problem however is, how many of these are still vibrant and how many are merely struggling to survive? It has been known from written records and from the testimonies of the generation that many languages go extinct like we see from the Indo-European languages which have died out without descendants: the Gothic and Vandals, Gaulish, Cornish and recently the extinct Manx.

Generally, children learn the first language of their parents and more or less replace older speakers silenced by death. But given the rise of the nation state which gives birth to *lingua franca*, and the emergence of colonial empires which condemn their subjects to the language of the master, the primacy of this slow demographic trend has been brutally upset. Language can be a target for suppression, if the authorities consider it as culturally inferior one. There have

been periods for instance, when American Indian children were forbidden to speak a language other than English at school and when pupils were not allowed to speak Welsh in British state schools in Wales".

The situation is not far from what we find in some of our Nigerian schools. Some parents even forbid that their children be spoken to in native languages. The consequence of this development is the gradual erosion of the native languages and their possible extinction. A niece who lives in Lagos was once eager to tell me in Igbo that she ate an avocado pear, and said: "eriri m ube onye-ocha" instead of saying "arachara m ube-oyibo". This experience was similar to France. Abbe' Gregoire was once asked to investigate the linguistic situation of the nation. He was dismayed to find out that only few knew French, even though it was, according to him, 'the only true language of France'. His recommendation thereafter was that local idioms be annihilated, *aneantir lespatois*, and 'universalize the use of the French language'. This was achieved, in France as in other places, basically through compulsory public schooling, as notoriously emphasized by Ernest Gellner, and to some degree also through compulsory conscription, as documented by Roger Frubaker.

Now that we know language is not only a working system of communication in the community wherein it is used but also the product of its past history and source of its future development, and that one's mother tongue is intimately, and in every detail related to the rest of one's life in a community, as well as to smaller groups within that community, should efforts not be made given the danger our language (Igbo) now faces, to ensure its preservation and protection from corrosion of our culture? Should there not be restrictions on the use of other languages in Igbo territory (for the purpose of avoiding the gradual erosion of our mother tongue, taking cognizance of the 'law of Laplace')? If it is necessary, what type of restrictions?

Furthermore, given the fact that majority of the Igbo people migrate to other parts of the country (the northern, western and some southern states), in the process of which they abandon their mother tongues, and are forced to learn the languages of the other regions to which they migrate in view of facilitating communication and development in their region, a case of unilateral bilingualism, should those communities wherein they live not pay some compensation given the effects arising from the asymmetrical language learning? If so, by what level of criteria should that be fixed?

THE ADOPTED RESPONSE

The community whose language is learnt (a case of unilateral bilingualism) should pay some form of compensation to the one which drops her language. The community (Igbo) whose language is becoming weaker due to migration of her children and consequently the abandonment and erosion of her mother tongue

should, if she wants to survive, insist on the linguistic territorial principle, i.e., impose restrictions to the use of other languages within its territory.

THE NORMATIVE FOUNDATION FOR THE RESPONSE

The above answer to the preceding problem is informed by the ethical conception of justice as absence of exploitation, the Marxist idea of a just society as consisting in equality between men, absence of exploitation and elimination from the society all alienating activities of man: Here, the socialist ideal is the regime of abundance successfully realized by the suppression of exploitation and development of the forces of production. The inequality as typified in capitalism arises, Marx said, because the bourgeois exploit the proletariat through the appropriation and the use of their work without adequate compensation. Indeed, it is properly qualified as an unfair treatment of people through the use of their work or ideas for the other's advantage while giving very little in return. Marx identified this evil ostensibly-in capitalist division of labor called "the exploitation of the diversity of man's abilities for the production process that gradually deprives him of all human and social dignity.

All form of exploitation therefore, is regarded as intrinsically unjust. It violates the ethical principle of the right of worker to his creation. Moreover, it implies necessarily unequal exchange. Every economy is a complex form of cooperation or exchange, at which every individual brings some contributions and invariably receives some advantages. And based on the principle of equal exchange, this advantage should be proportional between effort and revenue; the physical and mental contributions of man to the realization of any utility must be accordingly compensated: The utility can be material revenues, a better socio-economic order realized by ability to communicate."All the efforts that make these outcomes possible are to be proportionately rewarded. As the Classical economists tell us; "man has constant occasion for the help of others, but it is in vain for him to expect it from their benevolence only.

JUSTIFYING ARGUMENTS

Compensation

Given the brief formulation of the principle above, it is completely in accordance with justice that in a population comprising of a number of communities with different mother tongues and similar economic condition, and in which one of the communities learns the other's language enhance transcommunity relations among themselves, that the community whose mother tongue is learnt contribute to the cost of the language learning.

Each community, left alone could cater for her physical needs, but if the regime of abundance the socialist ideals of just society is to be fully realized, people must come closer, the popular 'unissez-vous' appeal of Marx to improve their

social productive conditions. And language is the answer Language, say Marx and Ergel,'is practical consciousness ...for language,like, consciousness only,arises from the need, the necessity of intercourse with other men." Man is essentially social in his productive activity."Man" continues Marx,"lives or inorganic nature; and the more universal man is, compared with animal, the more universal is the sphere of inorganic nature on which he lives". Herder also expressed the same concern in his political thought when he advocated extending communication and interactions to various people and nations for more productive forces, encouraging an increasingly interconnected world. It is through communications and interaction with others that great things happen: According to him, the great artistic monuments of the globe are often situated immediately along the traderoutes of peoples, and..reflect wealth; trade, and therefore connectedness among peoples" However,this connectedness and commerce must also be conducted in an equitable and non:imperialist manner. It is for such an account of international justice that he made clear Europe's moral obligation toward the non:European in the light of the history of violent conquest and imperial rule."Europe must replace what it has wrongly taken", he states,"it must compensate for its wrongs, not as a matter of preference, but in keeping with the nature of things as they are". For wherever the colonial masters went and created their empires, they also made the natives learn these languages, to the exploitation of the later and the advantage of the masters.

The conscious effort by one community to transcend their pride and create a structure of co-operation on a larger scale requires: to be compensated because the utility which they achieve by that effort is profited by the community whose language is learnt. Not to pay for it sends us back to that unjust state of exploitation, whereas to compensate the efforts of the bilingual community not only incites them for greater co-operation, but creates equilibrium of justice in which exploitation is suppressed.-The community that learns the language of the other population sacrifices her time, physical and mental energies as well as money in order to arrive at the knowledge of that language that ushers in social co-operation and greater economic development. Justice demands therefore that this contribution be recognized and be proportionately compensated.

Learning a language different from one's own mother tongue puts one into a multiple disadvantage especially when it is learnt at an adult age. According to Penfield and Roberts,"when languages are taken for the first time in the second decade of life, it is difficult, though not impossible, to achieve a good result". Goetz also gave witness to this saying:"when people with different languages need to communicate, various expedients are open to them, the most obvious being second-language learning and teaching. This takes time, effort, and organization, and when more than two languages are involved, the time and effort are that much greater."Thus, the bilingual group is generally handicapped relative to the other group in economic and political competitions. Even their self-respect, says Phillipe is "seriously undermined as a result of the subordinate status given

to something as deeply associated with themselves (in other people's eyes and their own) as their mother tongue". This imbalance in result and work which they experience vis-à-vis their colleagues in spite of their additional labor must be properly adjusted by due compensations. For, what: they sacrifice or put in (the language efforts inclusive) is more than what they receive relative to their brothers a situation of unequal exchange. This is unacceptable. Social co-operation is essential for the production process, but as soon as that form of co-operation turns to the disadvantage of the one who gives it, it becomes inhuman, an alienation.

Therefore, in order that justice is done or the injustice is alleviated, there is need for adequate recompense by the beneficiaries of that social co-operation. There are two possible ways: either the community which does not learn the language picks up the overall financial burden of the other community, what Phillippe calls 'paying the enormous opportunity cost of the time it spends learning the second language' or she participates in sharing the financial cost. The second option may appear more acceptable but whatever is adopted, it can best be done through tax to achieve a wider participation of the members of the community whose language is learnt. Inversely, the migrants could receive tax reduction vis-à-vis the now lingua franca community or the reduction of an expansion of tax exemptions that primarily benefit the indigenes: It may even take the form of a shift of government expenditures in the direction that favors the high-skill migrants who contribute most to the economy; also shrinking those aspects of their welfare states that go beyond insurance, such as education fund exclusive for natives.

Another possible manner of compensating for this unilateral bilingualism could be by scrapping off the practice of 'quota system' which disfavors the migrants in spite of their being better than the natives and the enormous sacrifices or cost they had to pay learning the new language of the community in which they find themselves. Thus, allowing true competitiveness and swelling the pool of potential recruits for high-skilled jobs which is necessary for the growth of the economy. In this case, the Usman dan Fodio University, for instance should be ready to offer on the basis of merit, a chair of engineering to someone from Calabar or Enugu, although it may upset a Hausa man who otherwise would have got it. It is undoubtedly clear that much is gained notably for the scores of people on the floor, but also for the state in a knowledge-based human-capital-driven economy.

Linguistic Territorial Imperative

Aware that the systemic disadvantage suffered through: the unilateral bilingualism in the economic and political interactions cannot be fully compensated, not to talk of the deflated self-image in the process, although Marx regards it as those sacrifices occasionally required without which that desired

state of abundance which gives access to the highest just state is a wishful thinking, it is nevertheless necessary that a linguistic territoriality principle be asserted. This will go a long way to eliminating the feeling of alienation and consequently restore the self-image of the unilateral bilingual community through the consciousness that there exist at least some portion of the earth where their native language continues to be an asset. Through this language imperative, alienation is checked and the community's culture and identity are preserved in a long term. For language is "a cultural and political guidance system into which values handed down from the past are deposited. It provides the group or individual the means to identify with a given culture and political entity". It is a crucial component of a people or nation, the unique embodiment of their traditions, beliefs and practices. According to Herder, "language bears the stamp of the mind and character of a people... The genius of a people is nowhere more displayed than in the physiognomy of their language²:

As the adult generation may never master the second language well, leading to a reduction in their optimal economic growth, it is necessary to preserve the conditions of the locus where they can still offer optimal economic service. Language operates as "internal censor" mediating experience and verbal stimuli and when the semantic, vocabulary, and syntactic levels of one's language has been limited, it is unlikely that the individual will develop his full potential. This is so because it is the verbal mediation which language entails, and which according to Mueller, "facilitates further learning, which controls behavior and which permits the development of conceptual thinking". Thus if the adult generation of the community of a subordinate language have an area where their mother tongue is still an asset, then they will have a better social condition to increase the growth of revenue and well-being in their area. The territorial linguistic principle is therefore necessary, for given

the already weaker nature of the subordinate mother tongue like Igbo for instance, caused by the high mobility of the Ibos into regions of unilateral bilingualism, Igbo language will gradually be displaced account taken of other people who move into its region but keep on with English language. From the 'law of Laponce', we know that weaker languages gradually disappear when people start being nice to one another: "The nicer people are with one another, the nastier languages are with each other" The low status mother tongue can exist for centuries when there is a lack of social mobility into it. But, once people "start talking, trading, working with each other, indeed making love and having children together, one of the two languages will be slowly but inexorably driven out by the other, by the one which people have a stronger incentive to learn because of its being more prestigious or widely spread." And in our context, the English language which the migrants into Igbo land speak will displace Igbo

language. It is the position of this article therefore that restrictions be imposed upon the use of languages in a territory where the mother tongue is already weak. The identity function of language gains increased importance as part of a survival strategy against exploitation and marginalization. In order to safeguard the vulnerable mother tongue from being eroded in the face of high mobility effects, one of the best effective strategies is to impose restrictions on the usage of other languages within that territory a'firm application of the linguistic territoriality principle: *cuius regio, eius lingua*', This is done by constituting the weaker mother tongue the public language of that area, serving essentially as the only admissible language within that territory. It is to be used in all public administrations, legislative house, judiciary procedures, political discussions and functions, and ultimately as language of instructions in schools that should be publicly funded and compulsorily instituted for children. This strategy has been successfully used in a highly decentralized multilingual confederation like Switzerland; similarly it has beer introduced under great pressure by the dominated linguistic community in some multilingual states like Belgium in 1932 and C nada in 1975 through the Quebec's "Law 101". In a world of frequent contact and movement, the only way of protecting vulnerable languages is the imposition of the territorial principle. When one wishes to settle in a territory where such law exists, he/she should humbly be asked to learn the local language, no matter how prestigious or widely used their language may be. It is also vice versa in terms of compensation to the community which stoops to learn he language of the natives.

RE EXAMINATION, OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

In the face of high contact-world, removing the territoriality principle would certainly result eventually in flattening the linguistic surface of, the globe, leaving nations to speak only one language, English for instance, as the *lingua franca*, with the only difference of somewhat idiosyncratic way of pronouncing the English words now promoted to the status of mother tongue. Although individual mother tongues may be lost, one doubts why it should be a source of worry especially when compared to the tremendous economic and cultural advantages of sharing the same language nation or world-wide, promoting an increasing competition for human capital facilitated by mobility of high-skill workers. Above all, such nation-wide *lingua franca* not only affords the current privilege of using now one's own mother tongue (English) in world conferences and hotel lobbies, but more than that, there are immense other advantages at one's reach: being able to understand what the locals are saying to one another and even prevent the stable development of mutually unintelligible dialects. Moreover, the whole nation or the humankind will once more "speak the same language and form a single people", and thus possibly "no goal will be unachievable for them"(Genesis, 11.6). Given this enticing possibility, one asks whether anything at all could prevent us from looking forward to this new age in

human progress, apart from the irrational fear of the jealous Yahweh striking once again and cruelly thwarting neo-Babelian hubris.

Obviously, there are cogent reasons to prevent such attraction of universal communicability. Some of them include the resentment of those who happen to belong to the tiny minority of professional linguists, who understandably are not likely to condone the disappearance of over 99% of their subject matter the small group of translators and interpreters who would end up losing their source of liveliness, the select few aestheticians who love to steep themselves in delightfully varied linguistic environments

Above all, we have the long term benefits of linguistic diversity in the protection of cultural diversity which similarly permits the diversity of experimentation in private and social life, from which the whole of mankind arguably stands to benefit. Linguistic diversity is the strongest and the only realistic and acceptable deterrent on the trans-ethnic and national mobility of people; it is thus a wonderful population stabilizer in terms of slowing down the disruption of small communities or the means of enhancing the economic and political viability of institutional solidarity. Indeed, the long term benefits of linguistic diversity are great enough that the general interest requires its preservation through the imposition of territorial principle. (In effect, this article does not neglect the need to come together for greater

abundance, but where that happens as we maintained in compensation argument, the migrants should learn the language of the natives and should equally be recompensed).

Apart from the above benefits, proscribing territoriality principle has no attractive prospect not only because the vanishing of cultural diversity may well have a negative long-term impact on the general interest, but the process leading to it often generate and leave uncompensated, large and unjust inequalities. We have seen that having a mother tongue different from the one adopted as lingua franca puts one at a multiple disadvantage e.g. the affected people have to bear the heavy burden of acquiring proficiency in that new language; there are handicaps relative to natives of the lingua franca in economic and political competition. However, with the imposition of linguistic territoriality principle, there is at least a portion of the earth in which their own native language constitutes an asset, in which the mastering of that language constitutes an illuminating metaphor, a tariff to be paid by all non-natives, including the owners of the lingua franca. Where however, the lingua franca is given a free rein, those who do not have it as their mother tongue would not only pay a heavy bill of language learning and suffer a disadvantage on lingua franca territory, they will also begin to pay tariffs on their own soil and this involves a massive inequality of an unjust sort. Indeed, it is normal to encounter certain objections occasioned by the practical logistics of any principle or its evident clash with other valid principles, or else the validity of its basic arguments. Admittedly, it may be difficult to justify the restrictions on the use of other languages within a territory

given the fact that it impedes the fundamental liberty of movement and expression and choice (including the choice of language). Human fundamental liberty empowers each person to move where he wants and speak the language of his choice. However, this freedom must not infringe on the liberty of others to legislate over what is theirs. If we respect the right of ownership based on the principle of 'first come, first served', then people must respect another's right to determine for instance, how one's acquired Island must be used. Thus, one retains all liberty in the face of territorial legislation either to go into the territory or not. There is no other way of protecting vulnerable languages and so of securing linguistic peace in a world of frequent contact and movement than the assertion of the linguistic territoriality principle. If one therefore decides to settle in a particular area he should be despised enough to learn the language of the area. Much as the value of restrictions on the use of other languages within a given territory is transparent, like acting as population stabilizer and thus helping to slow down the disruption of small communities and enhancing the economic and political viability of institutional solidarity, it may still be objected that such restriction fails to take account of yet another serious problem which the absence of cross-cultural influences and cultural dynamism is bound to create: the narrow-mindedness or shortsightedness with regard to globalization and the awareness of the external world, a condition similar to Plato's allegory of the cave. This is no doubt a veritable problem, but thanks to the ever advancing world of communication and the pervading Mass media, the awareness of the movement of history shall be set at our doorsteps.

Finally, from the Marxist position we learn that injustice arises when the productive effort and remuneration are disproportional, thus requiring for the sake of justice that every effort be commensurately compensated. A problem however, occurs in determining exactly individual's linguistic contributions or efforts in the socio-political economy. There are people who would invest more mental energy to learn a language whereas others will learn the same with relative ease. How then can this problem be resolved? This is certainly a serious difficulty but Marx appears to have taken account of it when he suggested the norm of the value exchange of a product as labor time. And because of the variance from one individual or society to another, he interpreted the labor time as that time that is necessary within a particular society as a whole to achieve a given utility.