

The Lingua Franca Controversy in Nigeria: Echoes from Metrolingual Markets

Chibuzo Nathaniel Nwoko

*Department of English and Literary Studies,
Yusuf Maitama Sule University,
P.M.B. 3220, Kano, Nigeria*
manbuzzynow@gmail.com

Abstract

The status of the English Language as a lingua franca in Nigeria has been, at various fora, generating controversies. In a plurilingual state like Nigeria, the questions have been what language should be adopted as a national language? Should English as a foreign language continue to function as a lingua franca in Nigeria, decades after her independence? Consequent on these polemics surrounding the state of the foreign language in the country, this paper samples opinions and attitudes of Nigerian traders in Kano Metropolis towards the use of the language. The study draws insight from the linguistic theoretical paradigm of Metrolingualism, a theoretical framework of how people from different linguistic backgrounds in a multilingual society appropriate the resources of language in an urban and city areas. In carrying out this work, 200 questionnaires were distributed to traders in 3 market locations in Kano: Sabon gari, Farm Centre and Bata, being metrolingual markets. Our findings reveal that the use of English Language in Nigerian markets is of more economic value to the traders than the use of any local language. On this basis, our position here is that the role of the language, which is a globalized one, is not antithetical to our national development, hence should be sustained.

Keywords: Lingua franca, English Language, Metrolingualism, Global Language, Second Language

1. Introduction

The status of the English Language in Nigeria vis-a-vis what it ought to be today has been subjected to arguments and counter arguments. Its linguistic function is that of the nation's lingua franca, for it remains today the only acceptable language in official communications. Hence it functions as the language used in the Media and Media Advertising, Legislature, Judiciary, Education, Sports and Entertainment as well as in the governmental functions. In spite of the sundry roles played by the language in a multilingual country like Nigeria and its globalised status as a global language today, the controversy has been whether the foreign language should continue its function as the country's lingua franca; whether a national language should be adopted to take the place of English.

As a corollary to these views, the present study takes a dispassionate stance by looking the way of Nigerian marketers, sampling their opinions and attitudes towards the use of English as a lingua franca in Nigeria. Therefore, this paper relies purely on the responses received from Kano traders in the cosmopolitan markets of Sabon gari, Bata and Farm Center, using the research instrument of questionnaires. Central to this work are such questions as: Does the use of English enhance the market value of products and services? What is the attitude of the traders towards its use? And do marketers encourage the sustainability of English in Nigeria?

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The polemics surrounding the legitimacy and desirability of the choice of a language as Nigeria's lingua

franca is yet to be settled. It is still an open-ended discourse. Jowitt (1991) says that this was not the case prior to 1950 but that the debate began after 50s. Today, the debate gets louder and louder in academic, political and social spheres of life. Some scholars and elites have made proposals in favour of sustained use of English as a national and official language while others show aversion to it. On this note, the presenter is burdened with ascertaining the current true position of some Nigerians in a particular sector of economy and of varied linguistic origins. To accomplish this objective, such questions as whether the language is still desirable and needs to be sustained and whether the use of English or any of its varieties contributes to the commodification of goods and services in Nigerian markets, are raised in this paper.

1.2 Research Questions

The following research questions are raised in the course of this work to serve as a guide and direction to the study:

- I Does the knowledge of the use of English add more value to products and services in the city markets?
- Ii What is the attitude of Nigerian marketers in the Nigerian markets towards the use of English?
- iii Should the use of the English Language in Nigeria be sustained?

1.3 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this work is to ascertain the attitude of the Nigerian traders towards the use of English in the urban market places. If this objective is realized, it will go a long way in contributing meaningfully to the controversial discourse on what ought to be the status of the English Language in Nigeria. Drawing on this aim, the following constitute the objectives of the paper:

- i. to find out if the use of English adds more value to products and services in the city markets.
- ii. to be certain about the attitude of Nigerian marketers in the Nigerian markets towards the use of English.
- iii. to find out if the use of English in Nigeria should be sustained or discontinued.

1.4 Justification of the Study

The study, it is believed, will close the gap in the extent literatures on lingua franca debates. The result of the study will help the end user to be abreast of the current views about the status of English in Nigeria. By providing a platform for the audience to examine the pros and cons of the position of English in Nigeria, the findings will help in guiding the reader to make an informed choice about the best candidate among languages that is capable of playing an effective role of a lingua franca in the 21st Century Nigerian society.

2. Review of Previous Literatures

This sub-heading is a combination of conceptual and authorial reviews of some relevant past literatures. Fundamentally, it is informed by the need to identify missing gaps between the previous works and the current one and fill them in by providing answers to the research questions.

Conceptual Review

2.1 The Implantation and the Status of the English language in Nigeria

Much as we do not know the exact date of the arrival of English in Nigeria, available records including *Antera Duke's Diary* and history show that the earliest contact Nigerians had with the indigenous people of the Indo-European language family took place in the southern part of the country around 16th C. Available

accounts such as Adetugbo (1979) and (1984) reveal that the Portuguese were the first set of Europeans who established some contact with an Oba of Benin and had Pidgin as their lingua franca before the arrival of the British. They were inspired by the proceeds and viability of the Atlantic Slave trade. Besides this illegal trade, they were also driven by other forces like missionary work and colonialism, having already labeled the Africans as pagans.

Banjo (1970) says that the adoption of English in Nigeria as a lingua franca began in Lagos around 1862 at the time the city was declared a British colony. It further spread to other areas in Nigeria due to colonialism, Christianity and transatlantic slave trade that reached its peak in the 18th century. Around 1807, the time slave trade was abolished, some ex-slaves who had Nigerian root returned and settled in Nigeria. Some of them were teachers who helped in implanting, translation and teaching the foreign language in schools. Missionaries built schools and churches and exploited the fora as an opportunity to convert the people they believed to be pagans and at the same time exposed them to western education.

With the amalgamation of the southern and northern protectorates, the language was forced on the people of Nigeria and it was elevated above the indigenous languages, making it the language of administration and classroom instruction, at least from the upper primary education to tertiary level. It is also reported that English was granted a special status made in the classroom curriculum and studied under various sub-headings: Reading, Writing, Dictation, Composition and Grammar. At the lower primary level of education, English became a subject of its own. In fact, to cement its domineering position, it became a passport to white collar jobs, admission to tertiary education as well as the only yardstick for justifying one as educated or literate in Nigeria.

Although the 1999 Nigerian constitution, section 53 tacitly grants the English Language the status of a national lingua franca, it adds that legislative activities should be conducted in English and also in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba provided there are adequate arrangements. That proviso “Adequate Arrangement” remains to be seen as the National Assembly and even state assemblies go on with their businesses in English only and document their proceedings and resolutions in the same language only. The case is not different in the academia, judiciary, printing and advertising, governmental activities, sports and entertainment as well as in the official spheres of life in the country. In fact, it is the knowledge of English that is used as a yardstick to grade one as educated and literate. White collar jobs are the exclusive preserve of those who pass and possess a mastery of the English Language.

2.2 Lingua Franca

In a looser sense, the term “Lingua Franca” could be said to be a common and mixed language used by people who share different linguistic backgrounds. The origin of Lingua franca goes to Franklin, an Italian language of literature around the 17th century. It was first used by the Mediterranean merchants in the Renaissance period for the purposes of Trade and Diplomacy. This, perhaps, may be the reason why today it is still referred to as a Trade Language. According to UNESCO in Samarin (1986):” A lingua franca is a language which is used habitually by people whose mother-tongues are different in order to facilitate communication between them” (P.1). It is in this perspective that one could call it a contact language, a bridge language or an auxiliary language. These insights accentuate that a lingua franca is necessary in a plurilingual environment or a multilingual speech community, of which Nigeria is one. This observation is reechoed by Wardhaugh (2010) who avers that a lingua franca serves as a language of regular means of communication between different linguistic groups in a multilingual environment.

In a multilingual speech community, a lingua franca, by default, functions as an official or a national language. This is why it is already adopted as the language of government, legislature, judiciary, advertising, printing, education and others in Nigeria and other geo-linguistic milieu. Cases in point include Michif used by a sizable group in Canada as a mixed language made up of Cree and French, with Cree supplying its verbs while the nouns are derived from French. Other instances include Swahili found in Tanzania and generally used in East African states as a lingua franca. In a pacific state of Papua New Guinea, Tok-Pisin plays that role. Classical Arabic functions as the lingua franca of the Arabic speaking nations in the world. In the West African sub-continent, Hausa is potentially used as a lingua franca for commercial purposes.

In the contemporary world, Lingua Francas are mainly used in countries once colonized. This may account for the reasons why some critics and those averse to it prefer to call it an imperial language, a foreign language, language of domination and alien language. It should be remarked that its use should not be expected to be the same everywhere. For example, it is practically unthinkable that the type of English used by the native speakers would be the same as the one used in the ex-British colonized West African States. This accounts for the domestication of the English language today as well as its Nigerianization. It is also responsible for the pluralization of the word English as “Englishes” today. This goes to show that English, being a lingua franca in some places, is no longer the exclusive preserve of the Anglo Saxons and the British; it is being domesticated in such a way as to capture and express the feelings of the people of the new environment it enters. This is why Achebe in Grievés (1964) opines that: “If English is to be an effective means of communication in Africa...it is essential that it adopt itself so as to be able to express African concepts”. He goes on to posit that, that type of English must be a new English, different from the British, but will still be in full communication with all who use it.

In the same breath, Porvey (1976) states that nobody should be subjected to the English Language assumption of correctness in as much as the language has left its ancestral home. The language is today considered the world most common lingua franca, and the world most widely used language. It is estimated that about 1.5 billion people outside its ancestral home use it as either English as a Foreign language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL). That is about 20 times the number of people who use it as a native language or first language. In total, English has about 1.9 billion speakers today and Nigeria is one the states that use it as ESL and lingua franca.

2.3 Authorial Review

The debate on the status of English as a lingua franca takes a cyclic and resonating form, making it unending. It has been subjected to both academic and non-academic debates, with varied responses depicting people's attitude towards the language. On the roll-call include Chinua Achebe, a global literary icon who doubles as a custodian of Africa culture and heritage, as evidenced in his literary works. Achebe, in Jowitt (1991) defends the use of English as a lingua franca in Nigeria thus:

We can believe in the value of English to the very survival of the Nigerian nation without feeling like deserters. We can use our energies constructively in the important task of extending the frontiers of English to cover the whole area of our Nigerian consciousness”
(p22)

Achebe's standpoint here is that the use of English as a lingua franca is in tandem with the demands of the 21st century: a language that unifies instead of causing division. It is believed that this is the wish of the

people of a heterogeneous society like Nigeria. This standpoint is equally shared by Rao (2019) in this manner:

In the 21st Century, the entire world has become narrow, accessible, sharable and familiar for all the living on earth as even though there are some variations in habits, cultures, traditions regions used as a common language even though there are some variations in habits, cultures, traditions, regions and idiosyncratic aspects (p.64).

As divergent views on the status of English keep resonating, some scholars suggest the use of one of the local languages or the use of a minority language. According to Chimaobi *et al* (2016), such scholars include Sofulunke (1990) who proposes the use of Igala while others like Ajepe *et al* (2016) counter the use of English, describing it as a threat to the indigenous languages. They advocate the use of a regional lingua franca as follows: Hausa to be used in the North; Yoruba in the South West and Igbo in the South-East region. Their proposal centres on a multilingual language policy that will result in giving English a lesser recognition.

Kebby in Danladi (2013) makes a case for the sustenance of English as a lingua franca in Nigeria thus: “No Nigerian language can perform scientific and technological needs...because no one is perfect” (p.7.). This line of reasoning is not far from that of those who reason that if one indigenous language is isolated, other tribes in Nigeria will feel threatened and insecure.

In an attempt to strike a balance among the different perspectives, Achebe in Grieves (1964) proffers a sort of linguistic solution which could be labeled domestication and Nigerianization of the English language. This suggests a new English which doesn't rule out grammatical infelicities, a pidginsed and Broken version, still in full communication with African values and cultures.

Afolayan (1986) contends that English is the only eligible candidate to serve as a Nigerian national language, considering the critical discourse on national unity. His remarks are as follows:

It is unrealistic for anybody in Nigeria today to think national unity can be forged in the country without recourse to the utilization of the English language. It has been the language of the creation of the political unity itself, and also the language of its socio-economic unification and administration. Furthermore, the fact that it is now functioning as the language of Nigerian nationalism cannot be denied.

Based on the extant literatures reviewed so far, it becomes apparent to find out that no scholarly work in this field has delved into the commercial sector to investigate the contributions of the English Language to the nation's economy as well as the attitude of the marketers. These extant literatures, most of them are paper reviews and unempirical essays, seem to have shut their eyes to the echoes that may arise from the commercial sector. This silence in the previous works necessitates the current study so as to fill in the identified missing gaps. For this reason, the present study makes a shift away to another critical sector of the society; that is the market places and adopts an empirical approach to the ongoing debate on lingua franca.

2.4 Theoretical Underpinning

This work is built on the theoretical model of Metrolingualism. It is a linguistic theory that studies the language habits of people in the city, people from different geo-linguistic backgrounds who are at the same time in contact with other languages in a multilingual society. The theory is associated with Pennycook and Otsuji (2015). They observe that “metropolitan sheds light on the ordinariness of linguistic diversity as people go about their daily lives, getting things done, eating and drinking, buying and selling, talking and joking, drawing on whatever linguistic resources are available” (p.i). This frame work encourages the use of data from people who engage in various businesses in the metropolitan cities, investigating their attitudes towards languages used in such urban areas.

3. Research Methodology

This presentation employs the use of survey research method, with questionnaires constituting the major research instrument. 200 questionnaires were distributed to the respondents whom the researcher solicited their total assistance by answering the questions in the questionnaire on the spot. The questions are designed in a dichotomous structured pattern in order to elicit either a Yes or No answer only from the participants. This is why the participants were inspired to take part as it took each between 2 to 5 minutes only to complete the survey. Three (3) urban markets in Kano Metropolis were selected, namely Farm Centre, SabonGari, and Bata markets. The choice of these target areas was informed by the fact that they are markets that accommodate people from different linguistic backgrounds with different economic activities taking place in them. Upon collection of the data from the participants, the results are presented in tables using the simple percentage formula.

4. Data Presentation and Analyses

KEY: H = Hausa; I = Igbo; Y = Yoruba; O = Others; % = Percentage

The table below summarizes the responses to the first question from the questionnaire. The question is : Do you use the English Language/Pidgin English/Broken in buying and selling in this market. Yes No

4.1 Table 1: Summary of Responses

Test	No. of Respondents	Ethnic Origin							
		H		I		Y		O	
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
	200	65	06	64	00	46	04	15	00
Total	200	65	06	64	00	46	04	15	00
Total number of YES Respondents = 190								% = 95	
Total number of NO Respondents = 10								% = 5	

4.2 Table 2: Summary of Responses

Test 2 from the questionnaire says: Does your knowledge of the English language /Pidgin/ Broken help you to make more sales and services than your colleagues who don't understand English or Broken or Pidgin? The responses are summarized in Table 2 as follows:

Test	No. of respondents	Ethnic Origin							
		H		I		Y		O	
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
	200	71	08	82	02	17	01	19	00
Total No. of YES respondents = 189								% = 94.5 %	
Total No. of NO. respondents = 11								% = 5.5%	

4.3 Table 3: Summary of Responses

Test 3 from the questionnaire says: As a marketer in a Nigerian market, do you encourage the use of English/Pidgin/Broken among the buyers and sellers?

The responses are summarized as follows in Table 3:

Test	No. of respondents	Ethnic origin							
		H		I		Y		O	
3		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
	200	47	21	75	01	24	04	22	02
	Total No. of YES respondents = 168				%		= 84 %		
Total No. of NO. respondents = 32				%		= 16%			

4.4 Table 4: Summary of Responses

Test 4 from the questionnaire says: Do you think English/Pidgin/Broken is needed in the Nigerian markets? The responses are summarized as follows in Table 4:

Test	No. of respondents	Ethnic Origin							
		H		I		Y		O	
4		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
	200	68	25	71	00	32	00	04	00
	Total No. of YES respondents = 175				%		= 87.5		
Total No. of NO respondents = 25				%		= 12.5%			

4.5 Table 5: Summary of Responses

Test 5 from the questionnaire says: If English /Pidgin English/Broken is used in this market, is it because not all marketers and buyers/clients understand the local language? The responses are summarized as follows in Table 5:

Test	No. of respondents	H		I		Y		O	
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
5	200	60	11	76	02	30	00	21	00
Total No. of YES Responses = 187				%		= 93.5			
Total No. of NO Responses = 13				%		= 6.5			

5. Discussion

5.1 Research Question 1: Does the use of English/Pidgin English/Broken in the market increase or enhance the market value of your products and services?

The data in Table 2 above provide an answer to this question. 189 respondents which account for 94.5% of the total respondents answered Yes. This implies that in a multilingual environment and market, a knowledge and use of the English Language attract more customers to the marketers' products and services than the products and services of the marketer's counterparts who don't understand the English Language. Heller (2010) and Duchene (2009) validate this observation, for they posit that multilingual skills and competencies possessed by a marketer attract more values to his products. In the present study, it is only an infinitesimal number of 5.5% that answered otherwise. The message from this finding is that in a plurilingual speech community such as Nigeria, a knowledge of English or its varieties such as Pidgin or Broken is desirable for an urban marketer to be very successful. This is because it a basic skill that enhances the value of products and services.

5.2 Research Question 2: What is the attitude of the marketers towards the use of English in the market?

Based on the result got from the data, it could be said that the responses are quite significant and revealing. It shows that 84% of the total number of respondents favour and encourage the use of English or its varieties such as Pidgin or Broken in Nigerian metropolitan markets. This is shown in Table 3 above. In other words, the attitude of the traders is that of encouragement and sustenance of the language, particularly in cosmopolitan areas.

Drawing upon the results and findings of research question 2, the use of English in Nigerian markets is not in a conflicting relationship with the local indigenous languages. Prior to the study, it was hypothetically argued that all marketers outside the three major tribes would favour the use of English, but the result shows otherwise. Some unimaginable factors could account for the two respondents who opted out of English.

5.3 Research question 3: Should the use of English be sustained in the Nigerian markets?

The various responses from the respondents provide an insight to this question. The answers so far obtained, no doubt, align with Cholokova (2015) who contends that as long as the use of a global language reduces ethnocentrism and acts as a bridge language and by so doing attracts customers, it should not be wished away. The findings from the data in Question 3 show that an overwhelming majority of marketers are in favour of maintaining the use of English in our city markets. This position may not be unconnected with the reality that it is the only language at present that can ease communication among members of different ethnic nationalities. Besides, the language has doubled as a global lingua franca. International traders and customers and tourists alike rely on it for their businesses, hence purposeful Nigerian marketers could not afford to be left out. This reason may account for the overwhelming support for English, as the data show.

6. Research Findings

The objective of this section is to present the research findings derived from the available data. The data, as

has earlier been mentioned, was got from 200 questionnaires distributed to the respondents whom the researcher solicited their total assistance by answering the questions in the questionnaire on the spot. One of the findings in this study is that marketers in Nigeria find a lingua franca such as the English Language desirable and valuable, for it adds more value to the products and services. Data from Table 2 above shows an overwhelming majority of marketers (94.5%) responding in favour of commodification of use of lingua franca in the Nigerian markets.

It is also found out in this paper that Nigerians in the commercial sector have a favourable disposition towards the use of English as a lingua franca in their commercial activities. This finding is attested to in Table 3 based on the available data collected. This implies that the use of English as a lingua franca in Nigerian markets should be sustained.

Conclusion

Drawing on the insights from the metropolitan and metrolingual Nigerian markets, the use of English in Nigeria is not antithetical to the national development, hence should be sustained.

A test on the controversies surrounding the use of English as a lingua franca in Nigeria ought to have been settled in the affirmative. The echoes from the commercial sector of the economy reveal that the language, though foreign, is still necessary and desirable for Nigerians. Part of the findings in this work show that the use of English or its pidginised or broken version is of economic value to the marketers; it enhances the commodification of products and services. If, as a language used as a foreign language by well over 60 countries, while so many others use it either as a Second or First language, totalling close to 2 billion users across the globe, it proves that it is a language of development and economic development. In Nigeria, it has come to stay and our total support for it is needed since we cannot afford to queue behind the times as the world is fast changing and moving. On the account of this research, the language should be seen as a language of unity, development and integration.

Suggestions

The present study cannot claim to have settled the dust on the run of the mill controversies surrounding English as a lingua franca in Nigeria. For this reason, it could be proposed that more empirical studies should be done in other critical areas of life and sectors to ascertain people's position on this discourse. Such works should delve beyond paper reviews, memoranda, essays and newspaper reports.

References

- Achebe, C. In Jowitt, D (1991). *Nigerian English Usage: An introduction*. Lagos: Longman
- Adetugbo, A. (1979). The Development of English in Nigeria up to 1914: A Sociolinguistic Appraisal. *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*. 9 (2) , 89 – 105
- Adetugbo, A, (1984). *The English Language in the Nigerian Experience*. Lagos: Lagos University Press
- Afolayan, A, (1986). The English language and Development Oriented Higher Education in Nigeria. In: R. Freeman, M. Jibril (Eds). *English Language Studies in Nigerian Higher Education*. UK: British Council,. 102 – 119
- Ajepe, I & Ademowo, A (2016). English Language Dominance and State of Indigenous Languages in Nigeria. *International Journal of History and Cultural Studies*. (IJHCS) .2(4), 10-17
- Banjo, A. (1970). On the state of English Studies in Language. *JNESA*. 6 (1)

- Danladi: S. (2013). Language Policy: Nigeria and the Role of English Language in the 21st Century. *European Scientific Journal*.9(17), 1-21
- Dick, C.(2016). Revisiting the Lingua Franca Question in Nigeria: Insights from the 2015 Electioneering Campaigns..1(1), 145-159
- Duchene, A. (2009). Marketing, Management and Performance. Multilingualism as a Commodity in Tourism Call Centre. *Language Policy*. 8 (1), 27 – 50
- Osutji, E & Pennycook, A (2015). *Metroligualism: Language in the City*. NY: Routledge
- Porvey, J. (1976). The Role of English in Africa: A Survey. *English in Africa*. 3 (1), 13 -22
- Rao, F. (2019). The Role of English as a Global Language. *Research Journal of English*. 4 (1) 2 , 65-79
- Samarin, W. (1986). French and Sango in the Central African Republic. *Anthropological Linguistics*.28(3), 379-386.
- Wardhaugh, R. 2010 *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Willey – Blackwell.