

A Socio-Historical Appraisal of the Implantation of English in Nigeria

Ayo Osisanwo, Ph.D
Department of English, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract

People without the knowledge of their past are bound to repeat their faults. A socio-historical appraisal of the Nigerian situation discloses that before the incursion of the Europeans, Nigeria was an African country in which a kaleidoscopic linguistic diversity was existing. The implantation of English in Nigeria dates back to the nineteenth century. It was not through just a medium, rather through different media. The interest of the current researcher in this paper is to account for the different media through which English was implanted and the circumstances that led to each alongside its effect. This is a core aspect of the sociolinguistics of the Nigerian situation. The concern of sociolinguists is to trace the nature of linguistic variability and language change as they are affected by social structure. We conclude that the implantation of English in Nigeria was not achieved over a night; rather, it was achieved through determination, pressure, patience and persistence.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, implantation, English, History, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

History is to people what memory is to the individual (Fafunwa, 1974:1). People without the knowledge of their past are bound to repeat their faults (Ogu, 1992:63). A socio-historical appraisal of the Nigerian situation discloses that before the incursion of the Europeans, Nigeria was an African country in which a kaleidoscopic linguistic diversity was existing. Nigeria already existed as a multilingual nation, and the coming of the Europeans added to the linguistic complexity though with a change, that is, in the way it brings a unifying language. Various agencies have been involved in the unifying role, which sees to the implantation and development of English in Nigeria. These agencies, among others, include; commerce, religion and education (Banjo 1996:1-13). The differences in the agencies and period(s) of their arrival are probably responsible for the variations in the use and formation of the language in the Nigerian situation. Hence Bamgbose (1995:26) discusses the English Language as that which has been 'pidginised, nativised, acculturated and twisted to express unaccustomed concepts and modes of interaction. In line with his idea, Adegbija (2004:21) asserts that "domestication has given birth to Nigerian English". However, Osisanwo (2003:v) suggests that "the domestication of English language in Nigeria still has to be done within the framework of meaningfulness and international intelligibility". It is therefore the aim of this paper to appraise socio-historically, the factors that led to the implantation of the English language in Nigeria.

The implantation of English in Nigeria dates back to the nineteenth century. It was not through just a medium, rather through different media. The interest of the current researcher in this paper is to trace these media and the circumstances that led to each alongside its effect. This is a core aspect of the sociolinguistics of the Nigerian situation. The concern of sociolinguists is to trace the nature of linguistic variability and language change as they are affected by social structure. This branch of linguistics studies the properties of language which require social and contextual explanation. The implantation of English came through different media including; the missionary activities, colonial administration, conquest and trade relations.

Before the arrival of the Europeans into the continent of Africa, a linguistic diversity was already in existence, although many of these languages were historically related and this idea has remained unchanged till date. Many of the African states were either bilingual or multilingual and Nigeria is an example of this multilingual setting. The implantation of English in Nigeria added to the multilingual problem of the country. As earlier mentioned in the course of this paper and in line with Akindele and Adegbite (1999:58) 'the genesis of the use of English dates back to the early nineteenth century when freed slaves of Nigerian origin returned to Nigeria sequel to the abolition of slaves trade'. However, it is worthy of note to remark that, the beginnings of the English Language in Nigeria are not clear, in that we do not know who the first Nigerian speaker of English was. It appears however, that the use of the English language in Nigeria must predate both the first, known written use of the language by Equiano published in 1787 and the use of the language by British missionaries and administration (see Adetugbo, 1978:63).

According to Ayandele (1966:3);

Records show that except in old Calabar the cultural result of 400 years of European contact (with Nigeria) was the evolution of the bastardized 'pidgin' English which became the language of business. The Efik of Old Calabar seemed more accommodating to European civilization and, to the superficial observer, a blend of the European and indigenous was developing. The Efik, it is said, had schools, in the eighteenth century. By the middle of the nineteenth century, important Efik chiefs had learned to cherish 'Esquire' after their anglicized

names...

Nevertheless, the language has become the gateway to any highly placed status in the country today.

It is interesting to note that Nigeria's earliest contact with Europe took place in the 15th century and precisely in 1472. Places such as Warri, Brass and Calabar were some of the earliest to have contact with the English and some even before the beginning of trans-Atlantic slave trade. The Portuguese were the first set of people from Europe to set their foot on the West African coast. History has it that when they arrived, they found out that they could not communicate with the natives who spoke various languages, being a multilingual setting. Ogu (1992:65) records that it was not certain whether it was the Portuguese that first learnt the native language or vice versa, in order to ascertain communication. Indeed, before the British missionaries and the colonial administrators' presence in Nigeria (who were partly responsible for the implantation of the English language in the country) the coastal and the riverine areas of the country had had contacts with Europeans who spoke a variety of languages which were Portuguese, English and Spanish. Adetugbo (1978:64) asserts that 'it seems the Portuguese were the earliest European to have had a foothold in Nigeria.'

A look at the implantation of the Portuguese in Nigeria, which started in Benin could be traced to the grounds of trade and commerce. The Portuguese had established a strong trading post in Benin and Sao Tome in the late 15th century and are reported to have had an embassy in, and exchanged ambassadors with the court of the Oba of Benin. During this era, the Portuguese monopolized the pepper trade with Benin even by sending missionaries and trading agents to Benin. Hence, having first established mission schools in the palace of the Oba of Benin for his sons and members of the council, they later established others locally. In addition to this particular activity of the Portuguese in implanting the language, they sent Binis to Portugal to learn the language and on their return, to act as interpreters between Portuguese merchants and their local agents. However, the Portuguese influence in Benin was short-lived linguistically. The Portuguese merchants as recorded by Ogu (1992:66), did not speak much of the English language, rather they were interested in commerce. Their attempt to communicate by all means gave rise to what is today regarded as the Pidgin English. It was culminated by the mixture of the indigenous languages and the Portuguese dialect of English. There was a tremendous growth in the Pidgin English, until the English displaced the Portuguese in the pepper trade. English therefore became the chief coastal trade language. England was one of the early countries to challenge the Portuguese monopoly of the pepper trade probably due to an earlier espionage by a crew led by Thomas Windham to Benin in 1553. However, a question that still bothers scholars is that which was asked in Adetugbo (1978:65) thus;

If the Portuguese language gave a base to the pidginised language known as Negro-Portuguese used in the coastal trading posts, then it is pertinent to ask why Portuguese could have been so easily replaced by English even before British colonial presence in Nigeria.

Probably, a short while after the implantation of Portuguese in the Benin court, it became just one of the European languages used. Adetugbo (ibid) asserts that even at this time when Portuguese pepper trade monopoly was being broken by the English, Portuguese as a language had not actually established itself to withstand the challenge from English.

The linguistic effects we have from the earlier Portuguese contact are in line with the introduction of words such as; palaver, wrapper, Lagos (which was from the Portuguese word Lago that is, Lagoon). The essence of the variety of English spoken in the coastal region for coastal trade, that is, pidgin English was to facilitate trade contact with the different tribes with their multiplicity of languages and dialects. Some linguists have termed pidgin English as the bastardized version of English, that is it is an independent language which share boundary with other languages such as English Portuguese, French, Yoruba and Igbo. Ogu (1992:66) refers to pidgin English as "a farrago of bad words and broken phrases with great peculiarities in its verb forms... employs no gender." The role played in the implantation of English during the period of the trans Atlantic slave trade is also very significant to this study. It changed the status which English ever had in the earlier periods. During this era, England became a major exporter of slaves from the parts of Benin, Lagos, Bonny, Calabar, and Warri. The British and French came to be in possession of the slave trade in West Africa after the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. The British were however almost dominating exclusively the trade in the ports around the Niger Delta. The Nigerian coastal middle-men were the main means through which slaves were supplied to the British. This probably led to the emergence of another variety of the English language, called the corrupt form, with which the middlemen and the British communicated. Ogu (1992:97) and Adetugbo (1978:66) confirm that the practice of training interpreters abroad was reported by William Towerson, an English man, as early as 1598, of a young Portuguese speaking African who had escaped from a castle near Elmina:

This fellow came aboard our ship without fear, and as soon as he came, he demanded why we had not brought again their men, which the last year we took away, and could tell us that there were five taken away by English men: we made him answer that they were in England well used and were kept till when they could speak the language...

Hence, the coming of professional interpreters also had a great influence in the implantation of English language in Nigeria. Men and women who offered their services to ship captains along the west coast of Africa

came to the scene of professional interpreters specifically for the job. Furthermore, with the abolition of the slave trade and the establishment of Freetown in Sierra – Leone, freed slaves who had learned some English in America and Britain returned home. The place called Freetown (specifically designed to house the freed slaves) was set up by Evangelicals in 1787. Crowder (1968) reports that in late 1830s, a number of the freed slaves from Freetown came back to their original homes in Lagos, Badagry and Abeokuta, and by 1842, more than 500 had settled back in Abeokuta, and some 300 in Lagos. Their arrival brought about a change in the linguistic typology of the West coast. Some of the freed slave had received formal education from abroad. Some of them had become Christian converts and were very useful as interpreters/translators in Christian evangelisation. In their new home(s), they adopted the English language and western culture. During this period, the old Calabar's contact with the English resulted in English education both at home and in England. With the abolition of the slave trade, there was a change in the landscape as we were now on firmer grounds regarding the establishment of English in Nigeria. The country was opened up beyond its coastal regions in an attempt to find an economic alternative to the slave trade.

It is worthy of note to say that the aim of missionaries was not to make Christian converts speak English, rather it was to make them literate and be able to read and understand the bible in their own language. Some of the indigenes were able to pass through this learning stage very fast and so they became catechists and teachers in the mission schools. Later, the British colonized Nigeria and of course, used their language for administration. The language (English) became prominent in the educational sector, government/administrative sector, and was used for official purposes. It became an elitist symbol which was used by few privileged Nigerians who were the civil servants and served as models to other indigenes who were enthusiastic and desirous of formal education. Hence, the abolition of the trans Atlantic slave trade helped in a long way to strengthen and entrench English in the west coast.

Another way in which the abolition of slave trade helped the spread of the use of the English language in Nigeria was the way it forced the European slave traders to seek alternative sources of trade, for instance, in Calabar and the hinterland. Consequently, the speaking of English language spread to those areas. Towards the end of the 18th century, major explorations began to be sponsored for the deeper exploration of the African hinterland. An example was the African Association for the promotion of Scientific knowledge about Africa. In 1795, Mungo Park discovered that the Niger flowed eastwards (on his journey) and that trade from extreme East to West and West to East was possible. In 1830, other explorers like Clapperton and Landers Brothers followed and succeeded in making the journey from the Niger to the coast. Thus, trade routes were opened up for traders and their interpreters to do business and spread the use of the English Language over a large part of Nigeria.

The implantation of English in Nigeria could also be traced to the missionaries. The attempt by the British man to suppress the trans-Atlantic slave trade made him seek the services of the missionaries and became involved in evangelizing activities. William Wilberforce succeeded Thomas Fowell Buscton as the leader of the anti-slavery movement. Wilberforce referred to this movement thus; 'It is the bible and the plough that must regenerate Africa.' Consequently, in 1840, a conference was held at Exter Hall where eminent personalities like Prince Albert, Sir Robert Pell and Lord Shaftsbury launched a campaign for the evangelization of Africa. In line with this, Reverend Samuel Egerley and others got the cue to change the heathen habits of the people of Duke Town Calabar by ordering antelope to bombard old town Calabar in 1854. The missionary activity started the phase of formal acquisition of the English Language on the Nigerian soil. While pidgin continued to enjoy its dominant position as the language of trade, missionary teachers used standard English and taught their pupils to use it.

According to Igboanusi(2002:5) 'the influx of the English-speaking missionaries into the country started as from 1842, marking the emergence of non-standard or 'working English' (Omolewa, 1976: 14-15) widely used in Nigeria between 1842 and 1926. It should be noted that apart from the earlier Portuguese missionaries in the 16th century in Benin and Warri, the later missionary work in the country had three bases thus: the church of Scotland was established in Calabar and up to the Cross River; the church of missionary society (CMS) was established and its headquarters in Lagos and Abeokuta. The CMS founded schools in Badagry and its other activities were centred around the Niger Delta and up to the River Niger in Onitsha and Lokoja. Bishop Ajayi Crowder, a Yoruba slave educated by the church Missionary society in Freetown led the mission to Nigeria. His presence attracted evangelists and traders. Much of the country, which is now known as Nigeria was then within the reach of the Europeans, especially the English.

The second missionary activity started in September, 1842 in Badagry. This was after the short-lived Portuguese attempt. Having established Christian missions, they went ahead to establish schools, and the first known of such schools was the "Nursery of the infant church' which was founded by the De Grafts at Badagry in 1843. More schools followed this and the early schools concentrated on the teaching of English in different forms: grammar, reading, writing, dictation and also taught the scriptures and Arithmetic. In essence, their emphasis was on the 3Rs of reading, writing and arithmetic. According to Fafunwa (1974:89);

Since the early missionaries knew no local language, the medium of instruction was English at the

initial stages. Even the parents encouraged the use of English and wanted their children to learn ‘the language of commerce, civilization and Christianity’, they wanted their children to speak the whiteman’s language...

In 1846, the Church of England sent a mission to explore Calabar under the Reverend Hope Masterton Waddel. The mission included Mr. & Mrs. Samuel Edgerley and in 1846, the CMS opened a station at Abeokuta and the Methodist had their own in 1848. Wherever the missionaries went or built, they often established a printing press to encourage literacy and popularize religious literature. In the same vein, wherever they succeeded in winning converts, they followed it up with the establishment of schools. In 1876, the Methodist Boys’ High school was opened in Lagos, followed by Hope Waddel Institute in Calabar in 1895. By 1902, the first mission in Zaria was established.

From the missionary activities, it is glaring that the teaching of Christianity was supported by the ability to use the English Language correctly, recite and sing songs written in English. Special schools in which English was the medium of instruction were set up to train local clergy, catechists, lay readers and teachers. Soon English became the language of Christianity, civilization, education, government and so on. It became strongly implanted in the minds of the people. Afterwards, educational certificates were awarded to students which helped to encourage the learning of the language.

Following the missionary activities, the colonial administrators came in to support the implantation of English from a somewhat different angle. The colonial administrators intervened in the formal education in Nigeria, to confirm the prestige of English in the system.

In the 19th Century, Britain assumed the control of Nigerian territory under John Beecroft. Lagos was captured in 1861 when Britain made attempts to control the Brazilian slave traders, and thus stopped slavery. The formal annexation of Lagos took place on 30th July, 1861. After this, the government stepped in to establish guidelines for the organization of education and to emphasize the learning of the English language in schools. For instance, the effective learning and teaching of the English language became a yardstick for giving grants to schools in 1897. In addition, English became the language being used in the law courts to adjudicate cases, to run the government. The language became attached to getting good employment opportunities Odumuh (1987:11) observes that;

The language of the colonial Administration (the civil service) was English. Not only did the administrators help to ‘spread’ English Language using bureaucratize and officialese: but more importantly in their homes they again did in their interaction with domestic staff quarrels, gardeners, stewards etc...

In 1877, Sir George Goldie came to Nigeria and effected a merger of four largest British trading companies into what became U.A.C. (United African Company) with trading stations all over the Niger and Benue states. The British colonized the territories of West Africans and administered them in English. They enforced the language such that when English began to take over in all facets, the British people moved from mere commercial capitalism to absolute imperialism.

In 1887, special grants were given for the teaching of the English Language. British English speaking nationals were brought to hold administrative posts. The Sierra –Leonians (called returnees) were brought back to Nigeria after their education in Freetown and they settled down in Badagry. The English language and British culture were popularized and taught in schools particularly by the Victorian Lagosians.

The Northern and Southern protectorates became amalgamated on 1st January, 1914 and the name Nigeria was given by Mrs. Flora Shaw, and Sir Frederick Lugard became the Governor General. This made the need for a unitary language a matter of necessity and urgency. Lugard was very worried about the use of interpreters and the dangers being posed on his administration by this. Lugard had to suggest the use of adulterated English, as a way out of the predicament of deceptive interpreters.

The Moslem in the North had resisted the missionary education and by implication, the English language. They continued in their Arabic Language, moreso that they saw the English Language as that which was attached to the Christian religion. In essence, the English language and missionary activities which were flourishing and progressing in the Southern part of the country suffered a major set back in the Northern part. The British Government’s influence in the north was very minimal until the 20th century. Consequently, the northern part of the country suffered a great deal of backwardness in education. Hence, Fafunwa (1974:97) notes that in the Southern part in 1931, there were fifty-nine (59) government primary schools and ninety-one (91) mission schools administered by the government all with a population of some 16,000 pupils. In the southern part, there were only twenty-nine (29) mission schools and twelve (12) government schools all with a population of 1,131 pupils. Eleven (11) secondary schools had also been established in the Southern part while the Northern part had none. The presence of Islam and Arab traders before the advent of the British rule had affected the way of life of the Northern people. Hence, the English language and Christianity had a very little attraction to the Moslems then. The introduction of schools in the northern part of the country became something that could be done with caution. In 1922, Katsina college was established. The very late introduction of the formal education and the English language to the Northern part historically brought about the uneven development. When the English language finally gained ground in the North, it became a core course in the educational system and

became the dominant language with which other subjects were taught. Certification also became impossible without the English language. Anyone who needed to draw himself to the government had to understand the language. Likewise, those who needed government employment or who wanted to serve in prestigious positions in the government, such as clerks, messengers, book-keepers must understand English. Hence the English language became a language with an increasing demand.

There was also the implantation of English in Nigeria through conquest. The Berlin conference of 1884 – 85 is very significant for this conquest in that during the period, African countries were theoretically partitioned among the world powers. The Portuguese, having made the first contact with West Africa in the 15th Century, built the first English Fort on the Gold Coast in 1831, and later got to Nigeria through the Slave Coast.

Akindele and Adegbite (1999) assert that it was after they had fought and defeated the indigenous groups and made peace treaties with them that the colonizers were able to settle down on the coast. The colonizers needed to communicate with the indigenes, hence, they imposed their own language on them. The acquisition of the English language became a prerequisite for any indigene to have the attention of the masters.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion above, it has become crystal clear that the implantation of English in Nigeria was not achieved over a night; rather, it was achieved through determination, pressure, patience and persistence. In addition, it was not achieved by just a group of people within a limited period, rather by different groups within centuries. The Portuguese, British, Spanish and so on all had their own influence and contributions positively and negatively to the Nigeria of today. The language became adopted for inter-ethnic and inter-tribal communication. Consequently, by 1963, 10% of the country's population, (that is, about 5.5 million out of 55 million) was estimated as Nigerian speakers of English. Today, it is evident that not less than 25 million Nigerians are able to speak and write the language effectively. Succinct to say, the English Language has been well implanted in the country and has probably come to stay.

REFERENCES

- Adegbija, Efurosibina (2004) "The Domestication of English in Nigeria" in Awonusi, S. and Babalola, E.A. *The Domestication of English in Nigeria: A Festschrift in Honour of ABIODUN ADETUGBO*. Lagos: Unilag press.
- Adetugbo, Abiodun (1978): 'The Development of English in Nigeria up to 1914: A socio-Historical Appraisal' in *ODU: A Journal of West African Studies*. Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press. Pp 61 – 75.
- Akindele Femi & Adegbite Wale (1999): *The Sociology and Politics of Education in Nigeria: An introduction*. Ile-Ife: O.A.U. Press Ltd.
- Ayandele, E.A. (1996) : *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria*. Longman. Pp3-4.
- Bamgbose, Ayo (1995): "English in the Nigerian Environment" in Bamgbose et al (eds). *New Englishes: A West Africa Perspective*. Ibadan: Mosuro Publishers.
- Banjo, Ayo (1996): *Making a Virtue of Necessity: An Overview of the English Language in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Fafunwa, Babatunde (1974): *History of Education in Nigeria*. London.
- Igboanusi, Herbert (2002): *A Dictionary of Nigerian English Usage*. Ibadan; Enicrownfit Publishers.
- Jowitt, David (1991): *Nigerian English usage: An Introduction*. Zaria: Longman Nigeria Plc.
- Odumuh, Adama (1987): *Nigerian English*. Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press Ltd.
- Ogu, Julius (1992): *A Historical Survey of English and the Nigerian Situation*. Lagos: Kraft Books Ltd.
- Omolewa, Michael (1979): 'The Emergence of Non-Standard English in Nigeria 1842 – 1926' in Ebo Ubahakwe (ed) *Varieties and Functions of The English Language in Nigeria*. Pp 14 – 26. Lagos: African Universities Press.
- Osisanwo, Ayo (2003): *Path to Modern English Usage* Lagos: Femolus- Fetop Publishers.