

## **FRENCH AS A SECOND OFFICIAL LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA: PROBLEMS, PROSPECTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

English had remained Nigeria's only official language until 14<sup>th</sup> December, 1996, when the late Nigerian military Head of State, General Sanni Abacha, declared, through his Minister of Education, that French would soon be introduced as a second official language in the country. This French language policy, which has remained only on paper since 1996, will now be implemented by the current Federal Government. This paper takes a look at the problems and the prospects of the policy as well as its implications for the future of the English Language in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** French, Official language, Prospects, implications, future of the English language in Nigeria, amalgamation.

### **INTRODUCTION**

During the period of the scramble for Africa by the European and American colonial powers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British government succeeded in conquering and seizing the territory around the River Niger area. After this conquest and seizure, the area was named "Nigeria" Babajide (2001) notes that the name "Nigeria" is said to be morphologically derived from a blend of "Niger" and "area".

A colonial administrator, Lord Lugard, was appointed by the government in London to take charge of the new British colony. This marked the beginning of the British colonial rule in Nigeria. From that time to the present moment, the English language has been the only official language in the country. Bamgbose (1971) and Babajide (2001) claim that there are about 400 indigenous languages in Nigeria. These languages, according to Achebe (2012), are spoken by about 250 ethnic groups. But none of these is the official language, for obvious reasons: choosing one of the indigenous languages as the official language will be tantamount to conferring an official status on it on and imposing it on the other ethnic groups. Since each ethnic group have a fond attachment to their language as they have to their religion, each ethnic group will vehemently resist any attempt to impose the language of another ethnic group on them. That is why successive Federal Governments have continued to avoid adopting one of the Nigerian indigenous languages as the country's official language, and that is why English has continued to be the country's only official language.

On 14<sup>th</sup> December, 1996, however, the late Nigerian Military Head of State, General Sanni Abacha, declared, in a speech delivered by his Minister of Education at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, that French would soon be introduced as a second official language in the country, to be studied compulsorily in the primary, secondary and post-secondary levels of our educational system. The policy, according to the Minister, would in a short time make Nigeria to become bilingual (Igboanusi and Putz, 2008). Igboanusi and Putz (2008) go

further to state that the late Abacha's speech and later decisions led to the formal recognition, for the first time, of French as a second official language in Nigeria. Immediately after that declaration, recognition and adoption of the policy, elaborate preparations were made for its commencement. Eminent French scholars from Nigerian universities were assembled and mandated to write the curriculum for the subject in the primary and post primary institutions nationwide. Unfortunately, immediately after Abacha's demise, the policy was completely abandoned, and it has remained only on paper ever since.

But early this year, precisely on 30<sup>th</sup> January, 2016, the Minister of State for Education, Professor Anthony Anwukah, announced again that the Federal Government was soon going to reintroduce French as the Nation's second official language (see *The Punch* of 4<sup>th</sup> February, 2016, and *The Guardian* of 21<sup>st</sup> February, 2016). This language policy on French, no doubt, is bound to create a number of problems and implications for the future of the English Language in Nigeria. These problems, prospects and implications constitute the main focus of this paper.

### **The Current Status of English and French in Nigeria**

The status of a language in a monolingual or a multilingual country can be identified and described. Accordingly, a particular language can be a first language (L1), or a second language (L2) or a foreign language in a country. The first language of the people of a country is the language which they first acquired as children. No one formally taught anyone of them the language; no one stood before anyone of them at home and tell him or her "I want to teach you how to speak our language" or "This is how to pronounce this word" or "Say these words after me ...". It is a language whose sounds he/she first listened to and imitated, the language which he finds himself speaking. In most cases, a person's first language is the language of his/her parents, which is the reason it is called his/her mother tongue. The 400 or so indigenous languages in Nigeria are the first languages of the 250 or so ethnic groups in the country. For example, Yoruba is the first language of the great majority of the Yoruba, Ibo the first language of the Igbo and Hausa the first language of the Hausa and so on – just as English is the first language of the English people, Chinese the first language of the Chinese and Japanese the first language of the Japanese.

English is a second and an official language in Nigeria. It is a second language because it is the language which all educated Nigerians speak after their mother tongues; it is also an official language because it is the language in which the government conducts all its internal and most of its external businesses and affairs. The role and functions of English in Nigeria have become common knowledge in academic circles in Nigeria since Bamgbose (1971). Suffice it to say that the English language performs more functions in Nigeria than any one of the indigenous languages of the country.

French is at the moment a foreign language in Nigeria. By characterizing the French language in Nigeria in this way, we mean that it is a language which is indigenous to another country (Wikipedia). In other words, it is a language which a great majority of educated Nigerians do not speak or need at all, and which almost all uneducated Nigerians know nothing about. It is also a language learnt in the four walls of the classroom and spoken mostly by French teachers and students in French classes. Thus, French is not a means of communication among large numbers of Nigerians. This writer has not seen a social gathering such as a wedding ceremony, or a birthday party or a church or mosque service at which the medium of communication is French. And there is no known Nigerian home in which the medium of

communication among family members is French. Even those Nigerians who study French and have academic or professional degrees in the language usually do not see many people to speak it to. Moreover, French is not taught in public primary schools in Nigeria. In the secondary school, French is a subject in the curriculum but few pupils have interest in studying it, probably owing to the fact that French teachers are usually not available from JSS I to SS III in any school. What usually happens is that a French teacher may be available to handle the subject in JSS I and when his students get to JSS II or III, there is usually no French teacher to teach them. And students of the subject in SS I may get to SS II and discover that there is no teacher to teach the subject. Araromi (1996), cited by Igboanusi and Putz (2008), accurately describes the plight of French students and French language as a subject in the secondary schools in Nigeria:

*Quite often, a class of between 35 and 40 students begins the learning of French in the secondary school only to thin out to 4 or 5 by the time they get to the senior secondary classes where they have to choose their examination subjects (p. 236).*

### The Grammars of English and French

The comparative simplicity or complexity of two languages can make them easy or difficult to learn by pupils or adults with a different mother tongue. Since Nigerian pupils will now have to learn English and French, it is necessary to find out whether or not the grammar of English and the grammar of French are equally simple or equally complex. We can illustrate this by conjugating the verb “come” in the present tense of the indicative mood in the two languages

English	French
I come	Je viens
You (singular) come	Tu viens
He/she/it comes	Il/Elle vient
We come	Nous venons
You (plural) come	Vous venez
They come	Ils/Elles viennent

As can be seen from the table above, the verb “come” remains the same when used with subjects of different persons and numbers, be they nouns (e.g. names) or personal pronouns except for the third person singular subject (David/he, Dorcas/she). In other words, the verb “come” is still “come” when used with I (1<sup>st</sup> person singular subject (noun or pronoun)), you (2<sup>nd</sup> person singular subject (noun or pronoun)), we (1<sup>st</sup> person plural pronoun). It is only when used with the third person singular subject (noun or pronoun here, he/she/it) that it adds an inflection or ending ‘s’ (i.e he/she/it comes). This is not so in French, as can be seen from the table. The verb “come” in French has three different inflections or endings -s, -ent, and ez when used with each of the subjects (noun or personal pronouns).

Adjectives in French also have different inflections depending on whether they are used with a singular masculine or a plural masculine noun or pronoun, but in English, the adjective is not inflected - it does not change in form whether it is used with a masculine singular or plural noun or pronoun. We will illustrate this point with the adjective “good” in English and in French:

English	French
Good boy Good boys	un bon enfant de bons enfants

The table above clearly illustrates what we have just said concerning adjectives in English and in French: it shows that in English, the adjective “good” remains the same “good” (i.e it has no inflection or different ending) whether it qualifies a singular or a plural masculine noun or pronoun whereas in French, it is bon for a singular masculine noun or pronoun and bons for a plural masculine noun or pronoun.

For the purpose of clarity and avoidance of doubts, the inflections in the adjective in accordance with the nouns, number and gender apply also when the adjective qualifies pronouns e.g.

The boy is good He is good The boys are good They are good	Le garçon est bon' Il est bon Les garçons sont bons Ils sont bons
The girl is good She is good The girls are good They are good	La fille est bonne Elle est bonne Les filles sont bonnes Elles sont bonnes

All these examples show that the grammar of English is simpler than that of French, which means that pupils will find English easier to learn than French.

### **Will knowledge of English facilitate or interfere with the learning of French?**

We will now briefly examine how the primary school pupils will fare in learning English and French at the same time. As is well known, some words in French are the same (in meaning and spelling) as those in English. Such words with the same meanings and spellings in English and French include talent, courage and general. These will be easily learnt by pupils studying the two languages. But there are other French words with slightly different spellings in English and French. Such words include savage (English), sauvage (French), circle (English), cercle (French), trumpet (English), trompette (French) and function (English) and fonction (French). These words may pose some difficulty for pupils studying the two languages with the result that a learner may write a word with English spelling in his French composition and vice versa. A teacher should compile a list of many such words and tell the pupils to take particular note of them. The question that we may ask now is “How did it happen that some words in English and French have exactly the same spelling and meaning in English and French and others have only slightly different spelling and meaning in the two languages?”

### **Why Many French Words Are Found In English**

The reason for the presence of many French words in English is historical. In 1066, at the Battle of Hastings in the English province of Sussex, King Williams of Normandy in France and his army conquered the army of King Harold of England and killed the English king.

That event marked the beginning of the long periods of domination and control of England by French Kings and rulers. The conquerors, the French King and people, introduced the French language and culture into England, and French became the official language in the country, the language of government, the language of law, religion, the military, warfare, foreign trade, education and scholarship. (Wrenn, 1969, Brook, 1972)

Consequently, many French words poured into the English language. Some of the French words that entered into English retain their French meanings and spellings, while others had their spellings slightly modified on entering into English.

### **The Problems of the Policy**

The implementation of the policy will face many problems. The first and most important of these is financial. Huge sums of money – money running into billions of naira – will be required to implement it effectively and successfully. This is because the policy would require the training of large numbers of French teachers to handle the subject in the primary, secondary, and post secondary institutions since the subject will be made compulsory at all the levels of the nation's educational system. The policy would also require the provision of more instructional materials like the language laboratory, all of which are now very expensive as a result of the unprecedented fall in the value of the nation's currency: ₦470 now exchanges for only one dollar. More books on French have also to be imported and government has to subsidize their prices so that parents can afford their cost and purchase them for their children and wards.

Moreover, important national documents such as the Nigerian Constitution, the national anthem and the national pledge will have to be published and made available in French so that Nigerians who prefer to read the French versions of these can do so without any hindrance. All these – the training of large numbers of French teachers, the provision of adequate instructional materials including language laboratories, require large amounts of money, which may be difficult for government to provide for obvious reasons. The nation's economy is now in recession and on the verge of collapse. The signs of a failed state are concrete and visible. As a result of all these, government revenue from oil and gas has drastically dwindled; and it will continue to dwindle because crude oil and gas pipelines are being bombed and destroyed on a daily basis by the Niger Delta militants. Oil facilities that these militants have destroyed will cost the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) and the Federal Government billions of naira to repair. Can the government ever get the money to fund the policy in the face of all these? The answer, again, is "No". Anyone who reads any Nigerian national newspaper will know the problems that the country is facing. The Federal Government and the 36 states governments owe their workers many months' salaries. The cost of providing and maintaining security nationwide continues to increase.

Most of the national newspapers of 31 August, 2016, including the *Sun* reported that the Nigeria Air Force spends ₦475 million monthly to fuel the jets used in the fight against Boko Haram in the North East and against the militants in the Niger Delta (pg. 5). The Fulani herdsmen also attack farmers, destroy or steal farm crops, and kidnap people, especially wealthy farmers, and other citizens for ransom. The members of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) kidnap their fellow Nigerians and foreign nationals also for ransom. All these groups constitute serious threats to national security. Therefore, the cost of providing and maintaining security will continue to mount;



and security will take huge chunks of the budget in the coming years. These developments will make it more and more difficult, or even impossible, for the government to find the wherewithal to fund the policy. It is almost certain, therefore that the policy is beset with many intractable serious problems and may fail.

### **The Prospects of the Policy**

Before proceeding in this section, it is important to clarify or define the term “prospects” so that no one will fall into the temptation of interpreting it as “advantages”. According to Herber and Paton (1979), “prospect” means future possibility or chance”. Sinclair (1992) and Hornby (2015) define the word in a similar way. “Prospects”, which is the plural of “prospect”, would therefore mean “future possibilities or chances”. Our task in this section, then, is to show whether this language policy, this linguistic policy of making French a second official language in Nigeria, has any chances of success or if, in other words, there are any possibilities of its succeeding.

While we cannot say here with any degree of certainty that the policy will fail, we would like to express the opinion that it is beset with many problems, most of which are financial and have been discussed earlier in this paper. Unless Nigeria overcomes these problems, unless the economy improves, unless the endemic corruption among the politicians, civil servants, military officers and in the police and the judiciary is curbed, this country will never be able to find the money to finance the policy. The almost hopeless state of the Nigerian economy and the endemic corruption that has taken place in the country within the last 17 years were clearly and accurately exrayed in the headlines of most of the national newspapers on the year 2016. Democracy Day, 29<sup>th</sup> May, *The Sunday Punch* issue of that day has the following screaming headlines on its front page: DEMOCRACY ROGUES: POLITICIANS, CIVIL SERVANTS, ARMY GENERALS STEAL 38 TRILLION NAIRA IN 17 YEARS:

- PRESIDENCY, NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, JUDICIARY, ALLOCATED 2 TRILLION NAIRA IN 10 YEARS
- INEC (INDEPENDENT NATIONAL ELECTORAL COMMISSION) SPENDS 509 BILLION NAIRA ON ELECTIONS IN 10 YEARS.

Similarly, a headline of the 5<sup>th</sup> August, 2016 edition of another national daily, *Vanguard*, reads: WHY NIGERIA SQUANDERED 96 TRILLION NAIRA OIL EARNINGS (*Vanguard*, Monday 5<sup>th</sup> August, 2016 p. 8). The 2.1 billion US dollars earmarked for the purchase of arms to fight Boko Haram in the North East of the country was diverted to electioneering campaigns and greedily shared by politicians.

And not long ago, precisely on 10<sup>th</sup> May, 2016, the immediate past British Prime Minister, David Cameron, characterized Nigeria along with Afghanistan as two “fantastically corrupt countries” in the world (*The Guardian*, 10<sup>th</sup> May, 2016, p. 8). Nigerian newspapers and government spokesmen have named politicians, civil servants and members of the armed forces who have as much as 3 billion naira or more in their personal bank accounts. As a matter of fact, Nigeria’s former Presidents, Vice Presidents, Former State Governors and their Deputies, retired army Generals, retired Police chiefs and retired judges still collect billions of naira yearly as pensions. It is the current President, Muhammadu Buhari, who vowed to stop these outrageous pensions, saying Nigeria could not survive under them (*Vanguard*, Wed. April 15, 2015).

*The Nation* newspaper of Monday<sup>4<sup>th</sup></sup> January, 2016, reported that the members of the National Assembly had earmarked 47.5 billion naira for lawmakers' cars (P. 45). Government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDA's) now cry out that there are no funds to carry out their statutory functions. The latest government agency to complain of lack of money to carry out its functions is the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Its Chairman, Professor Yakubu Mahmud, told the nation that lack of funds had delayed the commencement of registration of voters in the forthcoming elections.

The former chairman of the House of Representatives Committee on Appropriation, Mohammed Jibril, also recently charged the Speaker of the House with budget padding, saying that the latter had added a whopping sum of 300 billion naira to it with the aim of sharing the money among the members. Moreover, the *national* newspapers of Saturday, 8<sup>th</sup> October, 2016, were awash with the news of the arrest of corruption judges. The *SundaySun* put it this way: 363 MILLION ALLEGEDLY RECOVERED FROM 3 JUDGES; \$2 MILLION TRAILED TO ANOTHER JUDGE'S RESIDENCE (p. 1). *The Nation* put it thus: DSS RECOVERS 93.5 MILLION NAIRA, 530,087 DOLLARS FROM 3 JUDGES (p. 1)

Now, where can a nation whose economy is in recession find all the money that will be required to implement the French – as – a second – official language in - Nigeria - policy when state governments, and even the Federal Government are owing workers several months' salaries? So intractable is Nigeria's economic problem that the Federal Government has decided to sell some of the country's national assets to fund the 2016 budget and to get the country out of recession.

### **The Implications of The Policy For The Future of The English Language In Nigeria**

The implementation of the policy will have some important implications for the future of the English language in Nigeria. In the first place, it will bring an immediate end to the age-long domination and monopoly of English on the Nigerian national life. In other words, English will instantly cease to be the only official language of our country since its rival will be born on the very first day that the policy comes into effect. This contention is in agreement with the view expressed by Omoniyi (2003a: 14), cited in Igboanusi and Putz (2008), that the policy will be “a watering-down of the significance of English in aspects of national life”.

Another implication is that English will cease to be the only compulsory non-Nigerian language in the school curriculum, for the same reason – the emergence of a rival, French. The only thing that we do not know for sure now is whether students must pass only one of the languages or the two of them at a credit level in the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE) before they can gain admission into universities and other tertiary educational institutions in the country. If the students have to pass both languages at a credit level in this examination, it means that more hurdles have been placed on their way since any of them who fails either of the languages in the examination will not be admitted into any post-secondary institution in the nation. There are other important questions that have to be answered: 1. Will English and French be used together or interchangeably in the conduct of all aspects of national life, or will one language handle some aspects of national affairs and the other the remaining aspects of national life? 2. What aspects of national life will be handled by English and which by French? The best way to resolve these questions would be to conduct all our international relations and dealings with all countries where English is a first or second language in English, and to deploy French for the conduct of all our

international relations and dealings with all other countries where French is a first or second language.

Another implication, still, of the policy, is that it will lead to an increase in the number of Nigerian creative writers in French- an increase in the number of Nigerians who write short stories, novels, plays and poems in French, with the possibility that one of such Nigerian writers may emerge as a Nobel laureate in the foreseeable future. Again, as Omoniyi (2003), cited in Igboanusi and Putz (2008) rightly observes, it is doubtless that the policy will trigger a more global rivalry between English and French.

The attention of Nigerian students and adult learners will also have to be shared between English and French. Hitherto, no non-indigenous language in Nigeria competes with English for the attention of learners in the country. French will now trigger this competition. Finally, either phonologically, lexically or semantically, or all of these, a Nigerian variety of French will eventually emerge. This is apart from the fact that the pronunciation of French words and sounds by one Nigerian ethnic group will be distinct from that of the other ethnic groups, so that it will be possible to know, from the way a Nigerian speaks French, what part of the country he comes from.

## CONCLUSION

We have attempted to argue in this paper that the Federal Government's policy on the French language in Nigeria, a policy that makes French a second official language in this country, is bound to face many intractable problems. Prominent among these problems is lack of funds to implement the policy effectively and successfully. Though it is not openly admitted by the stake holders, the Government is broke. The revenues accruing to the Government dwindle everyday as result of ceaseless attacks on crude oil and gas pipelines by the Niger Delta Avengers; the cost of prosecuting the war against Boko Haram in the North East is mounting and this will make it difficult for Government to embark on a costly luxury like this policy, since the prosecution of the war on terror takes precedence over all other things. Moreover, the destructive activities of the Fulani herdsmen and those of the members of the Mass Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) gulp millions of naira in security cost. As already stated, all these and other problems are not most likely to make it possible for government to embark on such a policy in spite of its many benefits to our country and its citizens.

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