# THE SOCIO-LINGUISTIC CONFIGURATION IN NIGERIA: A CASE FOR NATIONAL INTEGRATION

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**Abstract**

*Nigeria is a linguistically diverse region with different ethnic groupings,yet she has failed in producing a national language that would foster national integration and unity amongst Nigerians. The dominance of English language in the country as the bridge of communication and a second language over the first language of its users ,has become a source of worry and threat to her national integration, as the indigenous languages are gradually facing extinction ,with the associated traditional values, fast eroding ,due to the linguistic hegemonic nature of English .Most studies on this problem have concentrated on the evolution of a national language,even outside the ethnic groups in Nigeria,but little or no effort has been made to look inwards, on the causes of this problem especially as it bothers on the socio-linguistic configuration of the country.This work therefore tries to fill this gap, using a qualitative research based on the Sapir-Whorfian theory of language.It was discovered that the sociolinguistic configuration in Nigeria has significantly contributed to this problem with its attendant consequences. The study proffers solutions for a more integrative and cohesive Nigerian society.*

## 1.0 Introduction

Nigeria is a multilingual societywith about 450 indigenous languages with Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba as major languages. Being a multi-lingual and multicultural society, language use is a key factor in fostering national integration, social harmony amongst the different cultural and ethnic groups that make up the nation. The different ethnic groups, prior to the colonial days, had their languages, moral values, cultures, religious beliefs and attitudes towards life and death. This status quo was maintained even after the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914.During this period,each ethnic group strove to assert her values and this was the genesis of Nigeria's problem.The problem is that none of these languages could serve as a national language due to protest for dominance and ethnic -

bickering amongst the indigenous languages. This worrisome situation made Banjo (1989)to comment thus:

> *'Although it is recognised that English is the official language of the country and therefore the key to the social , professional and economic success of every Nigerian citizen; it is equally recognised that there are important areas of intimate interaction where the efficient use of the mother tongue is crucial. Besides, a considerable part of culture in Nigeria is tied to the use of the Nigerian language. It is therefore not the intention to install the English language as the medium of communication in every conceivable setting in Nigeria..'*

Supporting Banjo's (1989) comment is Alo (2005:166).He further suggests that there is a need to give more attention to the cultural differences which clearly have some influence on the kind of English used in Nigeria. There is the need for a clear language education planning -of a variety of English, rooted in the socio-cultural environment – that can be effected in the classroom.

It is therefore imperative thatin aheterogeneous society like Nigeria, effective communication, interaction, exchange of ideas, pursuit of collective dreams and fostering of national integration and social stability can only be attained in a national/common language.

**Key words**: **Socio-linguistics, National Integration and Linguistic Strategies.**

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

The dominance of a foreign language amidst over two hundred and fifty Nigerian languages and the undauntingtask of choosing an official language amongst them; or even a national language has been a serious socio-linguistic concern and a source of worry to linguists, socio-linguists, educationists, policy makers and other stake holders in the business of national development in Nigeria.Allof these groups of people are dying to see that some remedies are provided to address this challenge.

That spells out why this work examines the socio-linguistic problems, amongst other contributoryfactors in Nigeria as proffers possible solutions to towards her national integration.

### 1.3 Aim and Objectives

The study aims at discussing the socio-linguistic stance of the Nigerian society , the inherent challenges as well as proffer solutions for national integration and stability.

This aim will be realised through the following objectives:

1. toassess the suitability of the socio-linguistic make up of Nigeria vis a vis her national integration.
2. to x-ray the consequences inherent in this make up in Nigeria
3. toproffer strategies for national development and integration in Nigeria.

**1.4 Significance of the Study**

The study is a step forward to most studies on the socio-linguisticproblems inherent in the Nigerian society.The significance of this work include:

- It will provide the basis for a re-appraisal of the linguistic problems in Nigeria,taking clue from the socio-linguistic perspective .
- The study will be of benefit tostake holders in this area of research, as it will throw more light and clear certain misconceptions regarding this issue.
- It will help in a better appreciation of the linguistic problems in Nigeria and create avenues for a healthy competition amongst Nigerian languages,towards evolving, possibly, the best ethnic language for national cohesion.
- Students who have interest in this area of study will find the work to be a useful resource material.

**1.5 Theoretical Framework**

This study is based on the Sapir –Whorfian theory which claims that the structure of a languageaffects the speaker's world view or cognition .( Wikipedia) .This invariably means that speakers' perceptions are relative to their spoken languages. This theory was first advanced by Edward Sapir in 1929 and subsequently developed by Benjamin Whorf in 1938with his idea of linguistic relativity .The two exponents of this theory are United States linguists who sought to establish the link between language and society, and by extension, the thought processes of speakers as determined by their languages. According to www.dictionary.com, 'this theory that states that ... language greatly influences the modes of thought and behaviour characteristic of the culture in which it is spoken'.This structure is in commensurable from one languageto another.'

Applying this theory to the Nigerian setting, the multilingual configuration of the speakers makes it apparent that their thought processes will be different from one another, considering the fact that

each region is linguistically –oriented to a unique language. The evolution of a common language will therefore synergize their perception of world view and bring about a more cohesive and unified society.

To achieve a clearer understanding of this study, it is pertinent to explain the following key concepts that are indispensable to this work. These include:

**2.0 The Concept of Socio- Linguistics**

Socio linguistics is a branch of Linguistics which studies the relationship between language and society,the variations of language and the different attitudes about language in a given socio-cultural context.

This area of study is relatively new with notable figures as Edward Sapir, Benjamin Lee Whorf, Grumperz, Hymes and a host of them. During the first four decades of the 20th century, language was viewedby socio-linguists as not just a means of communication, but an instrument for projecting socio-cultural inclinations and expression of thought processes. The Sapir-Whorfianhypothesis of language use, views language as a mirror of the society. It theorizes that "our language use shapes our perspective of the world" (wikipedia). It therefore follows that people who speak different languages, have different world views. Grumperz (1968), as cited in Pride and Holmes (1972: 34) opines that:

> *'In many multi-lingual societies, the choice of one language over another has the same signification as the selection amongst lexical alternatives in linguistically heterogeneous societies'.Pride and Holmes (1972: 34) put it more succinctly in these words,...'A corollary of this is that speakers in any community share rules regarding language use ,which allow them to interpret the social meaning of alternative linguistic choices.'*

It is, therefore.worthy of note that socio-linguists recognize the fact that, in every speech community, there exists a variety of repertoires of alternative expression which have social implications, and that in choosing amongst the various codes available to them, speakers indicate what might be called social meaning.

Therefore, in socio-linguistic analysis, numerous social factors that influence speaker's mannerism are considered. Factors such as social class, social context, geographical origins, ethnicity, nationality, gender and age etcetera.This paper will discuss the socio-linguistic make up of the Nigerian society along some of these parameters.

**2.1 The Concept of National integration**

National integration can be viewed as the awareness of a common identity amongst the citizens of a country .This means that inspite of ethnic variations, different religions, norms and values evident in a particular society; the citizens recognise the fact that they are one. This is captured in the common term, 'unity in diversity'.This kind of integration is a strong determining factor in building a strong and prosperous nation.The plurality of group many times throw up centrifugal forces that tend to tear countries apart. Essentially,national integration is a process that attempts to erode the presence of micro- nationalities in place of a spirit of nationhood.(Alapiki,2000).

National integration has been the foremost concern of every viable society such that certain ideals and principles are put in place in each society to promote national integration.Such concerns include like democracy, social equity and fundamental human rights; right to religion; justice and freedom of expression. In Nigeria, for example, the greatest challenge today is the threat to national unity as centrifugal tensions, resource control, ethnicity- based identity,politics and religious cleavages have enveloped national consciousness (Ake,1996).

The question remains – What decisive steps can be taken to ensure national integration in the face of the critical situation especially with regards to language use? The point is that the Nigerian government, since her independence, has made national integration, a top priority. Amongst other programmes, it has established the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) Scheme, the Unity Schools .the Federal Character Principle and State Creations to achieve this goal.

Along this line, Enegwea and Umoden (1993) identified two integration processes that can tackle disintegrative forces associated with inter-ethnic diversity.First, is the use of state policy to prevent dominance of one group at the expense of others, for example, the Federal character and the quota system in Nigeria. The second one is the use of policies and programmes to de-emphasize ethnic differences such as the NYSC Scheme in Nigeria.However, the success of such policies in fostering national integration is largely predicated on education in terms of its content and access, realizable through the medium of language.

**2.3 The Socio-linguistic Cnfiguration in Nigeria**

Language is culture.When two or more languages meet, cultures and societal norms have met. In the light of this,Nigeria is a multi lingual and multicultural speech community with more than four

hundred languages.Most of these languages are not mutually intelligible and a handful of them can competitively boast of standard orthographies and literature.This situation does not promote inter-ethnic communication and national integration. In addition, national education would also be difficult, if each citizen were educated only in his or her own language.

This sociolinguistic reality of the language situation in Nigeria triggered off interaction amongst the different ethnic groups .This led to the competition for recognition amongst languages in Nigeria. Against this backdrop, English Language emerged as a unifying language for Nigeria with the consensus of the indigenous languages, since none of these native languages was accorded a superior status at the detriment of others.

The English language in question came into Nigeria through the activities of the English slave traders along the West coast of West Africa and over time, consolidated its roots in Nigeria with the early arrival of the missionaries who came through Badagry in 1842.Since then,the language has spread rapidly ,permeating all aspects of life of the average Nigerian, including his psyche.

The attitude of Nigerians towards the English language is that of superiority over their indigenous languages, so much so that some parents see it as prestigious when their children choose English over their native language in their daily interaction.Consequently, English language has become the language of education, politics, communication, social and economic life , and even in global concerns in the Nigerian society.This is because it is the only detribalised language without barriers. Even at that, till date, English still enjoys a vantage position amongst the various Nigerian languages,since as a matter of national policy,it has been adopted as Nigerian's official language ,despite having a second language status.

To achieve a lucid discussion on the socio-linguistic make up of the Nigerian society, the following factors will be examined**:**

i. **Language Policy:** After Nigeria's independence, the position of English continues to be placed in the forefront in governmental declarations.The National Policy on Education of 1981 reflected and maintained the status quo with the accordance of an official position to the English language, allowing the native languages to be used as a medium of instruction in the early stages of the primary education. This socio-linguistic position has greatly impeded the growth of our native languages and cultural norms and is indeed a disservice to national integration in Nigeria.

ii. **Social Class**: The social class represents the position of the speakers in the society, measured by their level of Education in a 'foreign' language- English. Social context here includes parental background, profession,and the lexico-syntactic structure of the speakers' expression.

As it is in Nigeria, the socio-linguistic culture has resulted in the emergence of three identifiable strata of the Nigerian society- namely, the upper class/elites,the middle class with relative educational back ground and the lower class who are illiterates andperform some kind of manual work. These stratifications in the society, though implicit, do not create an atmosphere of equality, since social class is measured on the basis of attainment of the white man's standard as against our national standard and beliefs which project oneness and national consciousness.

iii. **Geographical Origin**: Each geographical region in Nigeria is identified with a particular accent of the English language, evident in the slight differences in pronunciation between speakers of that geographical location. The Northern accent is characterized as obviously ignorant and generally inept. The Igbo southerner is distinguished by his thick accent which differentiates him from his Yoruba counterpart ,who is equally cajoled for hisomission or wrong substitution of letters in the pronunciation of some English words. This socio-linguistic practicewidens the gap of national integration amongst Nigerians, since every region is given an identity mark of a unique mannerism of language expression which depicts social distance and negates national integration.

iv. **Social Context**: The social context is the register of the language used ,depending on the changing situations .Formal language for formal occasions and informal usage for informal situations such as meeting with friends and colleagues.Due to the educational level of the Nigerian society,some forms associated with the educated class are misused by the middle and lower class in a bid to belong;and this situation becomes divergent by their use of idiosyncratic forms .

v. **Age:**The socio- linguistic pattern of Nigerian users has resulted in some linguistic variations which has been identified with age especially in pronunciation and lexis.Language forms used by youngsters are usually influenced by exposure to foreign culture,movies and novel ,and as a way of group identification.For example, the youths

use forms such as Whatzup, How far? ; while the older ones use forms like How are you doing? etc.

vi. **Gender**:There is also sex variation in the language use of Nigerian speakers.Recent researches show that female speakers tend to use more prestigious forms than their male counterparts especially in their pronunciation and accent forms in an attempt to show sophistication.

### 3.0 The Socio-Linguistic Consequences in Nigeria

The socio-linguistic configuration of Nigeria, as discussed above, has numerous consequences such as the following:

i. **Multilingualism**: Multilingualism is one of the consequences of the socio-linguistic trend in Nigeria. This is a situation where people in a speech community speak more than two languages.An average Nigerian is expected to have at least three languages in his speech repertoire- his mother tongue,any of the major languages (Igbo,Hausa or Yoruba)and English.This linguistic situation is farfrom genuine development and national integration because speakers cannot achieve proficiency in all these languages, since they only strive to acquire the minimal proficiency to be able to communicate within the speech community. More importantly, each speaker of an ethnic group develops a world view and thought process that is different from the others and it is a known fact that two cannot work together, except they agree. The situation would have been different in the case of a national language that will unify their perceptions and form a common ground for mutual interaction and national development.

ii. **English as the first language of most Nigerians**:The socio-linguistic situation in Nigeria has compelled Nigerians to be bilinguals and multilinguals.Udofot (2007) affirms that in the homes of professionals and middle class parents,English is spoken as the first language thereby relegating the mother tongue to the background because of the belief that it is better to equip the children with a global language to face the challenges of life. With the relegation of the local languages to the background, these languages become prone to extinction and the associated norms and values that are expressed through the languages are gradually eroded.

iii. **Emergence of Pidgin English:** Another consequence is the emergence of a simplified form of English called Pidgin English..Most users of Pidgin fall under the middle and lower classes

who have simplified the complex structure of English to Pidgin, in an attempt to interact within the society.However,this form of English has gained prominence even amongst highly educated people and the media(print and electronic)in Nigeria.

iv. **Emergence of Creole**: This is a situation where Pidgin English has permeated the life of a particular region in Nigeria and has gradually creolized to being used as the mother tongue; for example in states like Edo,Delta and Rivers State. Pidgin is a' bastardised' form of English language which has little or no global recognition. Its inclusion in the speech repertoire of Nigerians will only undermine their communicative competence within and outside the frontiers of the country.

v. **The Intrusion of Americanism:** Some Nigerians confuse the British form of English with the American form especially in phonological and lexical levels.Consequently, Nigerian speakers are now faced with a multiple communicative competence which is neither here nor there.As a erstwhile British colony ,Nigeria is supposed to be in tune with the British form of English ,as opposed to the American form. Mixture of the two forms exposes the Nigerian speakers to the beliefs and values of different cultures, in addition to theirs and this creates confusion and distortion of their world view and portrays the average Nigerian speaker as linguistically uninformed.

vi. **Code Variation**: Most Nigerian speakers practise code –switching or code-mixing when engaged in oralor written discourse.Code variation results from an attempt to ease articulation understand or catch up with words that are not readily available in the Nigerian culture. This clearly shows the linguistic interference of the second language over the foreign language which makes language mutually unintelligible.

Inspite of these linguistic consequences mentioned above, there is still hope for remedy. Certain linguistic strategies have been advanced in this work, towards ameliorating the situation.

### 3.1 Linguistic Strategies for National Integration

In view of the afore-mentioned socio-linguistic situation in Nigeria, the following linguistic strategies are recommended towards achieving national integration.

i. **Evolving a National language(Nigerian English-NE):**The recognition of a language or a variety of a language, according to Fromkin and Rodman(2011:43) is 'determined by political and social

considerations'.If Nigerians can communicate in global frontiers in the variety spoken in Nigeria and intelligible communication takes place, why then should we not recognise and adopt a Nigerian English?.Ekpe(2010:186) defines Nigerian English as 'the variety of English usedby Nigerians to communicate across social-culturalboundaries -but differs from that of the native speakers.However, educated Nigerians still try to keep certain rules in order to maintain international communication and intelligibility in cross –cultural communication,without necessarily sounding like native speakers'(www.nou.ed.ng)

ii. **Innovative languageteaching** : English Language teaching in schools should be consciously developed to accommodate, not just the linguistic aspect but the communicative aspect of language learning, For example , imparting in students, linguistic accent intelligible with global standards.

iii. **Review of language policies:** Language policiesare usually geared towards developing and adapting a language or languages for use in a country.In the absence of a national language in Nigeria, the policies should be reviewed to fully integrate the threemajor languages in Nigerian language policy inorder to reflect national goals andprioritize on communicative skills and competence.

iv. **Identification of linguistic codes and functions:** The status, functions and context of use of the approved languages should be clearly streamlined such that the excessive recognition and dominance of English language will be grossly reduced, to fully integrate the import of the indigenous languages.

v. **Cultural expression amongst literary writers**: More and more Nigerian literary writers should appreciate the necessity of expressing Nigerian oral culture by adapting their texts tothe traditional and cultural values of the Nigerian society.

### 3.3 Conclusion

In view of the socio-linguistic situation in Nigeria, the Nigerian society is fraught with numerous linguistic consequences.However,a lot of debate has been organised amongst scholars and linguists as to the best option to adopt in ameliorating these linguistic concerns in Nigeria. While some proposed the adoption of a national language which may either be one of the major languages or a totally foreign language like Swahili; others asserted the need for the recognition of the Nigerian

English which has variously been committed in writing and has developed its varieties within the country.

Though an official declaration on this issue is yet to be made, the general consensus is the adoption of a common language that will bridge ethnic disparities and enforce national integration.

However, this study advocates that these identified factors militating against the evolution of a national language should be decisively addressed to pave way for an integrated and linguistically viable society ,to enhance national development in Nigeria.

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