Chapter 2

Language and Identity in Nigeria

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Introduction

In this chapter I explore the connections between language and identity in Nigeria, with ethnicity serving as the backdrop against which these issues are examined. I begin from the position that there are local and national identities and that language variation is one of the ways in which the differences between them are highlighted. However, in Nigeria, through a curious collusion between missionaries, the colonial government and local politicians, these differences were glossed over by the creation of standard languages and the deployment of common myths of origin. Languages that were hardly mutually comprehensible were declared dialects of a common tongue, and ethnic identity became fixed on the basis of this language. Variations in identity on the basis of variations in language were foreclosed, and a national ethno-linguistic identity was imposed.

I use the examples of the three major ethnic groups—the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa—to demonstrate that clans and communities possess a local identity which is self-generated and has a symbolic value for the people themselves. National ethno-linguistic identities were therefore constructed to dispel the pull of these more authentic local identities and to serve as tools for mobilisation in the contest for political power and the struggle over limited resources. In this process, national identities created the myth of a homogeneous whole, which was then assumed to be fixed and rendered invariable. Access to multiple identities on the basis of actual language spoken was therefore blocked.

Finally, I argue that in the areas where the minority ethnic groups live, a local "pidgin" has developed for purposes of interethnic communication and commerce. This language could have provided access to an identity not based on ethnicity. However, pidgin does not have

enough institutional backing to be of service as the necessary avenue to an identity not based on ethnicity and mother tongue language.

The primacy of language

Long before the postmodernist valorisation of language began, the primacy of language in human experience has never been in doubt. In social practice, language functions as a vehicle of interaction and a medium of communication, but it has always possessed an added cultural dimension, as a tool of semiotic ideology. To speak a language is not only to reach out to the other but also to declare a social bond, a sense of shared values and communal identity. Language does not only *order* experience, it also *creates* experience, and in the process sets out *what* can be experienced and *how* it can be experienced. To immerse oneself in a language is to set out the parameters and possibilities of what can be experienced within that language.

Without going as far as Lacan (1997:65) to state that "it is the world of words which creates the world of things", we can safely say that language is as much a tool of human beings as human beings are tools of language. This makes of language both a mundane and mysterious phenomenon.

Since early antiquity the adoption of a particular tongue has also been a badge of membership within a particular group, a marker of a particular identity. In this sense, language and identity have often, if not always, been coupled and conjoined. But the coupling of language and identity via ethnicity raises a host of complicated issues, some of which I hope to explore in this chapter, using the Nigerian context as an example. I take the position that there are local *and* national identities. Local identities are based, among other things, on actual language spoken (dialect, if you will), and national identities are based on a standardised version which then serves as the basis of nationally recognised ethnic identities. These language-based ethnic identities are often arbitrarily constructed and they freeze the relationship between language and ethnicity, thus "perpetuating a myth of language as a strictly bounded phenomenon and ethnic groups as culturally homogeneous" (Herbert, 1992:2). Variations in identity—on the

basis of variations in actual language spoken—are thereby foreclosed and access to "new ethnicities" (Hall, 1992), on the basis of new developments and the emergence of new languages, is denied.

In the Nigerian context, where an English-based pidgin has developed in the delta areas in which several minority ethnic groups live, the possibility of the emergence of a "pan ethnic" (Erickson & Schultz, 1983) identity based on this new "language", is seriously curtailed due to lack of institutional support. Transiting from one identity to another becomes impossible within this paradigm, and the possibility of assuming multiple identities based on the ability to shift between various sites of the language continuum is similarly denied.

Language, dialect and ideology

LePage and Tabouret-Keller (1985) argue that a number of factors generally contribute to ethnicity and a shared sense of ethnic identity. Among these are: a common language and culture, a common sense of origin and self-identification within the group and ascription to it by others, and/or a sense of kinship and common inheritances. Of all these factors, the idea of a "common language" appears to me to be the most problematical, that is, if we assume that by common language we mean that when one member of the group speaks, the other will automatically understand. Ethnic identity based on mutual comprehensibility among the various groups and communities is clearly difficult to sustain, because of wide variations within some so-called dialects of a particular language. Even-Zohar (1985) lists several instances of this kind of variation in a number of European languages. Among the German dialects, for instance, a Bavarian would not automatically understand Plattdeutsch or Silesian. In Denmark's two islands and one peninsula, each with its own major dialect, people speaking Jutlandic (one of the island dialects) do not, without a preparatory education, understand Zealandic (another dialect). Even in the fairly linguistically unified space of Sweden, there are variations between the dialects of the north and south that deny access to an automatic comprehension between both. Of all the languages listed by Even-Zohar,

in the Norwegian example, a combination of historical, ideological, and political factors related to the issue of national identity has created intense language conflicts, highlighting the difficulties involved in coupling language and identity in a fixed, bounded and unproblematic manner. Even-Zohar's conclusions (1985:134), spell out this absurdity in a graphic manner:

> The situation today is absolutely bewildering. Here is a nation that was to be deliberately planned, with a certain deliberately constructed identity that had to be coupled with a certain language. Since that language did not exist, they invented it. The moment they wanted to bring some peaceful harmony into that torn society, the government had no better idea than to set up a committee to make a third language, in order to give the nation a unified vehicle. But today in Norway nobody uses the "common Norwegian language," and the language conflict continues to rage with alternating intensity. Ask Norwegians how many languages they know and they will reply, "Twelve: Swedish, Danish, and ten Norwegian."

The question of language and dialect is a fairly contentious one. What constitutes a "dialect" and when does it become a "language"? In the light of the examples already cited, I take the position (along with Even-Zohar, 1985:129), that "the very term dialect is a matter of ideology, because otherwise any dialect could have been transformed into a language, or at least labelled a language." In Africa, this fact is borne out by the arbitrariness with which some languages were distinguished from others and classified accordingly, even when they were mutually comprehensible and had hardly as wide a variation as others which *were* classified together. Makoni (1996:262) affirms that, "the decision to distinguish between Zulu and Xhosa was necessitated by a desire to resolve the competing interests of missionaries". And again, that "the distinction between Kangwane Zulu and Swati was politically motivated because there are more structural similarities between the two than between, let us say, urban and rural Zulu."

Harries (1994:216) describes how a group of Swiss missionaries working in Southern Mozambique and Northern South Africa created a standardised Tsonga by reordering and rearranging some linguistic signs in the dialect of the people. In fact Louw (1983:374) also describes how the missionary groups prevented the development of a standard position for Xhosa and Zulu.

What these instances prove is that the decision to label a particular tongue a "language" or a "dialect" involves several considerations centred on interests that are both semiotic and ideological. Again, as we have seen, some of these so-called "languages" are artificial constructions which acquire legitimacy from the power of the *naming* or *labelling* interest group, rather than from the *named* or *labelled*.

Ethnos, language and identity

In Nigeria there are over 400 languages spoken. Of these, three are considered "major languages", while all the others are considered "minor" or "minority" languages. By Nigerian juridical and constitutional definition, Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo are designated major languages while the over 400 others spoken in the country are seen as minority languages. The terms "majority" and "minority", in Nigeria, also translate directly to the distribution of political and socio-economic power and status. Belonging to a majority language group means having relatively more power and status than belonging to a minority group. In a situation of intense socio-economic and political competition over the distribution of power and resources, these terms become heavily invested with semiotic and symbolic value.

As we have seen, the coupling of *ethnos* and language, and therefore also "identity", is not as "natural" as it may initially appear when these concepts are deployed. In Nigeria, as in other parts of the world, various interest and power groups were actively involved in the construction of standard languages and identities into which various peoples and communities were then boxed. To quote Makoni (1996:262): "In spite of the arbitrariness with which standard languages were created, they were

expected to 'reflect ethnic identity,' with language and ethnicity being seen as a "bounded, boxing-in and homogenising phenomenon".

The fiction of linguistic homogeneity has been actively sustained at the national level by eroding local peculiarities of speech and dialect, that are not only discouraged but also denigrated as examples of uncultured and uneducated speech habits. "Tribal laagers" as Maake (1994:13) calls them, are thus created, and individuals and communities are coerced or manoeuvred into submitting to their classificatory authority.

In northern Nigeria, for example, where Hausa is the major language, other minority groups are expected to adopt and speak it because of the power and status conferred upon it. In the early 19th century, when the Fulani jihadists overran northern Nigeria, the conquering Islamists did a curious thing: instead of imposing their own Fulfude language on the entire population, they adopted Hausa, a local language, as the *lingua franca* and medium of communication throughout the Caliphate which they established. Minority languages were effectively marginalised and a new ethno-linguistic identity was created from a coupling of the power of the conquerors with the language of the conquered. In this manner, the Hausa/Fulani oligarchy was established, which has dominated the region for almost 200 years. Local identities were suppressed by a combination of the power of language and religion. When the British colonists took over, the system of indirect rule which they had instituted, promoted this identity through their language and bureaucratic policies and practices, which endorsed and reinforced it. The Kano dialect of Hausa was standardised and adopted as the "officially recognised" version.

There were at least two identity positions mobilised by the jihadists in their campaigns of conquest. The *mallams* and the *fulani-gida* who started the holy war, were an educated minority. Islam was the over-arching identity which served as the vehicle of mobilisation for communities which were not Fulfude-speaking. In short, religion was employed to mobilise the Hausa-speaking majority and the other communities. The *bororo* (the cattle fulani), however, who constituted the majority of the Fulani people, were mobilised to fight on the basis of linguistic identity.[1]

The jihadists encountered no major problems in shifting between various identity positions, because during this pre-colonial period ethno-linguistic identities of the sort we now know, were virtually non-existent. Among the Hausa-speaking peoples, identity was largely town/community based (i.e. local identities). Rather than Hausa, people saw themselves as *Ba Kano* or *Ba Sokoto*, as the case may be, emphasising their towns/communities (Kano, Sokoto), instead of an ethno-linguistic grouping. Indeed, even to this day, we find people adopting the names of their communities as their surnames. When the demands of modern bureaucracy and the insistence of colonial administrators compelled people to have surnames, several people simply surnamed themselves Kano, Sokoto, Shagari, Jos, etc.—indicating both an immediate clan affiliation and a less specific affiliation based on the community. [2]

In the south-west of the country, where the Yoruba are in the majority, the term "Yoruba" is used as a classificatory label for a wide range of clans and communities who describe themselves variously as Ondo, Ekiti, Oyo, Ikare, Ijebu, and so on. We should recall that the word "Yoruba" itself was originally only used to describe the people of Oyo who, before the arrival of the British, had forged an empire from a variety of diverse ethnic groups. With the arrival of the missionaries and the British colonial power, Oyo Yoruba was standardised and made available as the officially accepted variety. The development of orthography and the translation of the Bible into Oyo Yoruba served to reinforce the idea of an "original version" of the language of which other varieties are merely "dialects". Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther's translations of the Bible were most helpful to the proselytsing efforts of the missionaries, and made available to the first literate local *elite* a common language to which, in spite of local differences in speech and dialect patterns, they could claim allegiance. The demands of status and power meant that previously warring groups could subsume their differences and stake a common claim to an identity based on a language which had been arbitrarily chosen and imposed.

At this point we must note that geographical contiguity did play a role in all of these developments. We would not be able to otherwise explain

the exclusion of Itsekiri, which shares several structural and lexical similarities with Yoruba, from this ethnic identity. In terms of linguistic affinity, Itsekiri is perhaps closer to Yoruba than some of the dialect groups which come under that label. It is possible to argue that other identity-generating factors such as myths of common origin may also have been at work here, but then again, those myths, as we well know, are necessary fictions constructed by power groups for ideological purposes. In predominantly oral societies such as these, the promotion of group solidarity often takes precedence over historical accuracy. So geographical location is a plausible reason for the exclusion of the Itsekiri, which ordinary Yoruba language speakers recognise as a sister *language* rather than as a dialect of Yoruba which it could just as well have been.

The point being made here is that language-based ethnic identities are *constructs* which arise from specific historical circumstances and ideological imperatives. Without having being socialised into standard Yoruba, it is easier for an Ikale (a dialect of Yoruba) to understand an Itsekiri (a different language) than to understand Oyo Yoruba. Examples of this kind also abound among the other majority languages. Among the Igbo, for instance, it is easier for an Onitsha to understand Ekwere (a language spoken in Rivers State), than to understand another Igbo speaker from, say, Abakaliki. The Ika people across the west of the river Niger from Onitsha, who also speak a language broadly similar to Igbo, also insist on a different ethnic identity.

These cases represent instances of the maintenance of local identities and a refusal to be placed under an imposed label. They appear peculiar merely because these "invented" ethnicities, which can serve only as descriptive categories and contrasting labels, have over time become essentialised to such an extent, that they now conceal the historical processes which led to their emergence. They have assumed the status of "authentic" essences, which are only now and again deconstructed when local identities, for whatever reasons, rise in resistance against them.

Constitutionally Nigeria is a federation, and even though years of unitary military rule have subverted the federal idea, the political and administrative structure of the country still pays lip service to the concept

of federalism. There are states and state administrators or governors who are supposed to administer the country along federal lines. In the 1950s and 1960s, when there were only three regions dominated by the major ethnic groups, various minority groups rose up in protest against their marginalisation. During the ensuing civil war, the federal government broke up the three regions into twelve states, to gain the support of minorities and to allay their fears of continual marginalisation. Since then, a Pandora's box has been opened. Local identities, even within the old Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa hegemonic trinity, have staged a resounding resurgence, clamouring for new states to be created to match their own local sense of themselves as different and distinct peoples. Nigeria now has 39 states, and the clamour for the creation of still more states has not abated.

With over 400 languages available for such claiming, the absurdity of language-based identity becomes increasingly obvious. Ancient animosities, recently concealed by the newly constructed and superimposed labels of ethnic identity, have resurfaced to fracture the imposed hegemonies of the past. In Igboland, for instance, the old Anambra state was split into Enugu and Anambra states, and since then intense rivalries have developed between the two new states—sometimes degenerating to xenophobic levels. In the new Enugu state, indigenes of Anambra state are considered "outsiders" who are routinely retrenched from jobs in the state bureaucracy, to force them to relocate to their "homeland".

"African 'colonies' were really administrative fictions with nothing holding them together but the bureaucratic imagination and territorial appetite of the colonizers" (Lindfors, 1997:122). So too, ethnic identities in Nigeria were fictions constructed to fit "a language of the imagination" of particular powerful interest groups intent upon furthering specific goals or ideologies.

The politicisation of ethnicity

Apart from glossing over "dialect" and difference, the labelling of groups and the nature of the power relations between those labelled and the

naming agencies, led to a tendency for the labelled group to appropriate and internalise its new identity (Erickson, 1993). According to Jenkins (1994:206): "The individual's experience of the consequences of being categorised may over time lead to an adjustment of his or her own image in the direction of the ... public image." In spite of the evidence of the resurgence of local identities in the state-creation drama in Nigeria, there can be little doubt that the major ethnic groups still command an irreducable appeal which possesses great mobilisation power in times of political crisis. The recently annulled elections in Nigeria and the re-emergence of an exclusionist Yoruba political organisation to promote the political interests of the group, show that these ethnic identities are not about to disappear. Indeed the entire tenor of public discourse points to a re-privileging of these identities.

Perhaps the real problem does not have to do with the accuracy or otherwise of these semantic labels. The problem is the internalisation and politicisation of ethnicity to the degree that it engenders conflict and, through its coercive power, forecloses other avenues through which a stake to multiple and plural identities can be made. Even though these ethnicities have no guarantees in language as they claim, they still possess such immense sentimental and symbolic power that their call acts as rallying points in periods of crisis and conflict. Their power and potency remain precisely because they have been appropriated and internalised by those so labelled. In short, they have become instruments of cultural ideology, inextricably implicated in the material and semiotic processes of culture, determining relationships, policing boundaries, and subtly maintaining the political and socio-economic mechanisms which set them in place in the first instance.

The example of an Igbo-speaking politician from the Eastern region of Nigeria reveals some of the absurdities that often arise from the ethno-linguistic classification of people. Dr Mnamdi Azikiwe, first president of Nigeria and leader of the National Council for Nigeria and the Camerouns (NCNC), thought that his party and a host of smaller affiliate groups had won an election in Western Nigeria in the 1950s. An Igbo in a predominantly Yoruba-speaking territory, he turned up in the regional

parliament after the elections, expecting to take his place as premier of the region. What he had not reckoned with, was that the Action Group (AG), the opposing political party, led by a Yoruba, had deployed the bogey of ethnic identity and negotiated an alliance with the smaller parties to form a government in the region. Distraught at the turn of events, Azikwe migrated eastwards to his "homeland" across the river Niger, to take the premiership from a non-Igbo-speaking leader of his party which had won the elections in the east. The political reality of ethnic "boxing" was asserting itself, both in the events in the west, and those in the east.

Nnamdi Azikiwe, however, did not stop trying to negotiate a multiple identity for himself all his life. Born at Zungeru in the North, and having spent most of his years in Lagos in the west, he was fluent in all three major languages. But the ethnic boxes proved highly exclusionist and resistant to "outsiders". At the height of the Nigerian Civil War, when it had become fairly obvious that the Republic of Biafra (the seceding eastern region) would not survive, Nnamdi Azikiwe declared that the Onitsha people really came from Benin, and were thus also descended from the Edos. A wave of public outcry from the Igbos greeted this declaration. Azikiwe was accused of being a sell-out, a traitor and enemy of the Igbos and the Igbo cause. And once again, his effort to lay claim to another identity outside the ethnicity into which he had been boxed, was denied.

The Azikiwe story—which reads like a comedy of errors—highlights the "lighter" side of the consequences of the politicisation of ethnicity and the hermeticism of ethno-linguistic groups one labelled. The more tragic stories appear daily in the media, from the former Yugoslavia, to Rwanda and Burundi. These narratives provide evidence of the absurd depths to which we can descend once we uncritically appropriate and internalise these labels of identity.

Minorities and minority languages

There are several definitional problems associated with the use of the term "minority language" (see for example Adegbija, 1997, for a useful summary of these). Suffice it to say here that minority language, in the

context of this discussion, refers to all the languages used in Nigeria—aside from the three constitutionally designated "major" languages.

In the delta region of Nigeria, where a lot of minority language groups often live in uneasy co-habitation, a local English-based pidgin has developed for purposes of inter-ethnic communication and commerce. This pidgin is particularly well developed in the Delta and River states, where there is a diverse array of ethnic groups and languages without any asserting overwhelming dominance. In the Cross River and Akwa Ibom states, where Efik and Ibibio are predominant, the language does not appear to flourish as significantly as in the former states. Nigerian pidgin is a *contact* language which allows interaction between various ethnic groups. It has no "native speakers" and therefore does not come with the cultural baggage of the other ethnic languages. The fact that Efik and Ibibio share great similarities in terms of structure, grammar and a great many lexical items, means that the minorities in the areas in which they are spoken, can reasonably do without a pidgin. The question again arises as to why they are classified as different languages, rather than as dialects of the same language.

We must remember that "the process of pidginization probably requires a situation that involves at least three languages, one of which is 'dominant' over the others" (Wardhaugh, 1986:57). In the delta region, several local languages co-exist, and the official "dominance" of English led to the development of this English-based pidgin. Pidgin would have provided access to an identity not based on ethnicity, but the common view is that pidgin is "bad" or "rotten" English and it is thus denigrated. Because it developed from the fairly uneducated lower classes, it is regarded as deficient and somewhat inferior to the "standard" languages from which it borrows. These are probably the reasons why it has hardly had any institutional backing over the years. Perhaps pidgin may some day develop into a proper *creole*. The proportion of inter-ethnic marriages in which one partner does not understand the language of the other, is increasing, and the children born out of such unions may turn out to become native speakers of a new *creole*. If and when this happens, the

possibility of laying claim to an identity based on language but not on ethnicity, would have considerably improved.

Concluding remarks

In the main this chapter has attempted to examine the complex issues surrounding the question of language and identity in Nigeria. An exploration of the role of ethnicity as a complicating factor to this equation, has also highlighted the manner in which powerful interest groups have defined these ethnic identities and ensured that the "boxes" of identities remain hermetically sealed.

I conclude that despite the spurious claims of ethno-linguistic identities, they remain powerful and compelling, for they are always instrumental in attempting to block the emergence of other identities and to stifle the very possibility of their formation.

Notes

[1] I owe these insights to Dr Ibrahim Abdullah of the Department of History, University of the Western Cape, South Africa, whose in-depth knowledge of these issues further clarified my perspective.

[2] I use these terms in the sense in which Edward Said uses them in *The world, the text, and the critic* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983).

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