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Author

Osundare, Niyi

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CALIBAN'S CURSE; THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE
AND NIGERIA'S UNDERDEVELOPMENT

By

Niyi Osundare

To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.

Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 17

Language can be used to oppress, imprison, dehumanize, demarcate, and exclude. It can be the foster father of privilege, and a weapon for sentencing the non-privileged to silence.

The Present Writer

Shakespeare completes the dehumanization of Caliban by denying him possession of man's unique attribute: language. His prejudiced Elizabethan imagination depicts Caliban as "a savage and deformed slave," the chief source of his slavery and deformity being his enchainment to the language of an arrogant colonizing alien, Prospero. Prospero's art as a princely mage is enabled by language, which he uses for one of its primitive functions: to conjure, to cause to happen, and most important, to put Caliban in a spell. Language aids Prospero in asserting himself, and in taking control over other people, his environment, and the universal sympathies. In short, language is one of the principal attributes that make him "a bud of the nobler race."

Rather than possess his own language, Caliban is possessed by the language of others, his mind entrapped, his articulation frustrated by the mechanics of an ill-digested foreign tongue. The linguistic dispossession of Caliban not only facilitates but also justifies and, indeed, hastens his dispossession of his land and home. The intrusion of Prospero and his language triggers off the alteration of Caliban's reality and his spell of agony.

What Shakespeare celebrates in *The Tempest* is a slice of Elizabethan racism and ethnocentricism: the belief that civilization began and ended in Europe and the rest of humanity was a race that gabbled "like/A thing most brutish." Here is the vision of Daniel's in *Mesophilus* written in 1599, a couple of years before Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest*:

*And who in times knows wither we may vent
The treasure of our tongue? To what strange shore*

*This gain of our best glory shall be sent
T'enrich unknowing nations with our stores?
What worlds in the yet unformed Occident
May come refined with th'accents that are ours.*
(cited by Peter Young 1969:42)

The dominant myth in this and similar writings is the "refining," "civilizing" power of the English language. The myth grew and flourished later in the prose of Daniel Defoe who gave Caliban a grandson in *Man Friday*, and has survived in the racist imagination that invented Hollywood's Tarzan. The myth thrived on the belief that the "savage" not only has no language, but is incapable of mastering a "sophisticated" European language gracefully donated for his education and civilization.

Of course, *The Tempest* was written in the early 17th century; Caliban "lived" and "died" so many years ago. But alas, Calibanism remains. It manifests itself today in the Nigerian's mindless love for the English language and his total denigration of the indigenous language and the culture it articulates.

Ask a typical "educated" Nigerian elite about the place of the English language in Nigeria, and he will most probably reel off the usual "catechetical litany" (see Bamgbose 1976:16) of the traditional functions of the language and, therefore, its indispensability. He will tell you that English is an international language, the language of science and technology, of commerce and industry, and so on. He may even repeat the erroneous colonial cliché that it is the language of "high culture and civilization." He will stress the position of English as the glue in the political crevices of a heterogeneous Nigeria. Ask about the indigenous languages, and he will chuckle smugly and tell you categorically that they can never fulfil the enumerated functions. Ask why not, and he will tell you that the British, who built the political, social, and economic structures of the country, left behind their language, not ours, to run them. Inform him about the serious problems--political, social, educational, psychological, and cultural--posed for the country by the English language, and he will instantly accuse you of blasphemy against a sacred tongue.

Such dangerously uncritical attitudes towards the English language have been encouraged by recent studies of the role of English in developing parts of the world. For example, Randolph Quirk (1962), in a spirited and eloquent essay on the ecumenicalism of the language "that Shakespeare spake," charts the progress of English from "Small Reach to Large" and concludes that linguistic identity is not coterminous with national identity--a pronouncement aimed at lessening the chauvinism of English native speakers while assuaging the hurt of the outsiders who share the language with them. He repeats the usual lines that "English

provides the readiest access to the cream of world scholarship and the bulk of world trade" (p. 6), and that in linguistically heterogeneous parts of the world, "English puts everyone on a common footing" (*ibid*).

The effort of foreigners like Quirk in counting the blessings of the English language is complemented by that of "natives" who are often enthusiastic about measuring the conquering prowess of English. For example, Ali Mazrui, one of Africa's most versatile and prolific intellectuals, gleefully repeats a statement by Reporter, a Nairobi weekly magazine, that "When a Russian pilot seeks to land at an airfield in Athens, Cairo, or New Delhi, he talks to the control tower in English" (Mazrui 1975:203). Mazrui cannot contemplate the possibility of a foreign pilot speaking Kikuyu or Swahili to the control tower of Nairobi. Intercontinental communication is the own preserve of English and no "barbaric tongues" dare challenge this monopoly. It is astonishing that Mazrui wrote a whole book on "the political sociology of the English language," hailing the propagation of a new breed of "Afro-Saxons" (a dominant bourgeois class of Africans whose privilege is predicated upon having English as their first language), without looking at the problems posed for African development by English.

Even then, some of the functions often arrogated to English are highly debatable. It is not completely true, for instance, that in a linguistically heterogeneous country like Nigeria English "puts everyone on a common footing" (Quirk above). English is a minority language spoken by less than 10 percent of the entire population, but ironically it is this minority who, exploiting the talismanic power of English, rule the country, literally dictating to the non-English-speaking majority. It is therefore a fallacy to say that in the Nigerian Babel, English, being nobody's language, is everybody's language (a fallacy often supported by the much-vaunted "neutrality" of English). The fact is that English is an elite tongue which creates a gap between the powerful and the powerless, the rich and the poor, the city and the country.

The English Language and Imperialism

The stratificatory role of English in Nigeria today is traceable to the manner and motive of its implantation. English was introduced into the country as the language of a dominant minority comprising merchants who came to exploit local resources for the enhancement of their home economy, missionaries who subverted indigenous culture in the attempt to win souls for Christ, and colonial functionaries who came to conquer, subjugate, and rule. The English language was thus the medium through which the first imperial orders were issued to Nigerians, and was throughout an enabling factor in imperial administration.

Indeed, language has always been an indispensable factor in empire building (see L. F. Brosnahan 1963; Joshua Fishman et al. 1977). For example, Latin played a vital role in the spread and sustenance of the Roman Empire. An important aspect of the Russification policy by the Tsars of a large chunk of Eastern Europe was the compulsory teaching of Russian in schools in non-Russian areas and the obligatory use of Russian in the official institutions of non-Russian regions (Elliot Goodman 1977:718). Joseph Stalin, acknowledging the importance of language in the process of building a world empire, observed that the empires of Cyrus or Alexander the Great or Charles the Great did not last because each of them lacked a common linguistic thread to sew the empire together (Goodman, p. 735).

In Nigeria (and other parts of "English-speaking Africa"), the colonial ambition to spread English was countered by strong apprehensions about the political consequence of the propagation of the language (see Peter Young 1969; Mazrui 1975; Adekunle Adeniran 1979; Osundare 1979). This gave rise to three colonial viewpoints. The first regarded the teaching and propagation of English as a *sine qua non* in the imperial programme, a means of "civilizing" the African by giving him a taste of the noble tongue. One of the most notable exponents of this attitude is Hope Waddell, who, for many years was a Church of Scotland missionary in Eastern Nigeria. Waddell confessed in 1848 that children in mission schools:

are taught in English, not merely from necessity on our part, nor solely because some knew our tongue a little and all wished to learn it, but also from a conviction of the great importance. . . . of promoting among them a knowledge of our own language.

(Quoted by Spencer 1971:19)

Waddell nursed the hope (by now partially fulfilled, one must admit) that English would one day become "the literary and learned language of *all* Negro tribes" (author's emphasis).

The second viewpoint stressed the dangers of teaching English to Africans, since such an act was likely to improve the "native" educationally and raise his level of political awareness. Political awareness is, of course, a sure way to nationalism, a disease of discontent which no colonial government would dare brook in the "native." This sentiment is directly relatable to the Leopoldian thesis that "education corrupts the native," turns him into a rebellious subject of the empire.

The third viewpoint is a comfortable *via media*: teach English, but not enough of it to "turn the native's head." And so, for a long time, the colonial system produced Nigerians who had a tolerable smattering of the English language to make them

function effectively as messengers, clerks, and other subordinates (Adeniran, p. 62; Ebo Ubahakwe 1974a), which would help advance the colonial system without jeopardizing it. As Peter Young (1969:396) has pointed out, "the British did not much care as long as enough English was learnt to make their jobs possible."

As far as the indigenous languages were concerned there was no consensus about their fate. While some missionaries devoted the time and largely intuitive linguistic energy to the study of these languages (although with a "vested evangelical interest": Spencer 1971b:541), other missionaries and political administrators saw no use in preserving what to them was the Babel of Africa. For instance, when the missionaries protested against the 1882 Ordinance, which recommended that "the subject of teaching (in all grant-aided mission schools) shall be reading and writing in the English language," Rev. Metcalf Sunter, the colonial inspector of schools, declared: "I regard these said (indigenous) languages as only interesting to the comparative philologist and never likely to become any practical use to civilization" (quoted by T. A. Awoniyi 1975:68).

Although British colonial administration eventually showed some benevolent tolerance towards the indigenous languages, they were never properly integrated into the school system. They were tolerated in the early years of primary education, after which they became totally irrelevant. Until very recently in some Nigerian schools it was a serious offence to be "caught" speaking the "vernacular" on school premises. Punishment for such an "infraction" included manual labour, suspension from school, whipping, or a forced memorization of some lines from the Bible. Thus the indigenous languages were not only denied a place in the curriculum, there was also a conscientious attempt to whip them out of the student's regard, to devalue them to the same proportion that the status of English was raised as the language of "education" and "civilization." Teachers (many of them expatriate) at that time rationalized their policy by arguing that it ensured a noiseless campus and forced students to use English, the only language of consequence. Many Nigerians emerged from the colonial era ashamed of, or unable to speak, their mother tongues.

The Contemporary Tyranny of the English Language

It is clear from our discussion so far that the English language was one of the principal weapons in the colonization of the Nigerian. However, as the colonial period drew to a close the awesome power of English passed into the hands of educated Nigerians, many of whom saw English as an instrument for mystifying the non-literate masses and exacting uninformed applause and political support. Hence, the fifties and sixties were the golden age of Nigerian Ciceros, when participants at political

rallies took cover from bolts of verbiage.* Take this example from Adegoke Adelabu, one of the mercurial politicians of the fifties:

It is sheer impudence for overdressed half-wits who have never read Thomas Paine, who have never heard of Robert Ingersoll, who confuse Thomas Jefferson with Marshall Joffre, to whom the name of Voltaire, of Rousseau, of Diderot, of Zola and of the Mills Brothers conjure no visions of heavenly bliss to poke their nose into the Freedom Forum.

(Quoted by K.W.J. Post and G.D. Jenkins 1973: 122)

This passage has an unmistakable Johnsonian rhythm: anaphorically seriated clauses, painstaking lexical variation, and a neatly wrought lengthy sentence. It is not only ostentatiously erudite, it also makes such erudition a condition for political enterprise. Such linguistic exhibitionism is found in most of the writings of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and in a less refined manner, in those of Dr. Kingsley Mbadiwe, the "man of calibre and timber," whose latest coinage includes "political juggernaut" and "political rascality."

Such prose of display is intended to impress, and to confuse and captivate by impressing: to mystify the masses who are talked at rather than to, talked above rather than communicated with. One of the unacknowledged causes of the crises of communication in Nigeria is the habit of the elite to talk like a book.

A further glance at the Nigerian's language habits reveals the psychological dominance of English. To many Nigerians achievement of English competence is a life ambition. Hence the few who display confident mastery of the language are treated like demigods. Nigerian literature provides examples of characters (Lakunle in *The Lion and the Jewel*, J. Ade Royanson in *One Man, One Wife*, Benjamin Benjamin in *One Man, One Matchet*) who build their shaky reputation on a showy display of the white man's tongue. Because of the premium placed on English there is a general tendency to treat the language as sacred and inviolable, a fact demonstrated by the Nigerian's low to total lack of tolerance of grammatical errors in English. Thus there is a general prescriptive attitude towards the language and this often results in hypercorrection as the Nigerian struggles desperately not to

*This point was missed by Bernth Lindfors (1973:133-175) who singled out Adelabu's "rococo style" as another example of the Yoruba love for the "colorful and deliberately foolish style." Adelabu's style was a nationwide rather than "tribal" phenomenon.

put his preposition in a terminal position, or use "who" where "whom" would be more "correct." But the Nigerian's Puritanism works only in favour of English; he is generally indifferent to errors in his mother tongue. Hence the Nigerian consciously or unconsciously Anglicizes his mother tongue without a reverse operation on English (see Ubahakwe 1974).

The inordinate love for English as the instrument of power, coupled with the lazy assumption that the functions performed by that language can never be taken over by the indigenous languages, has prolonged the tyranny of English in Nigeria. This has also led to the overstress of English in nearly all aspects of Nigerian life. If we go by functional rather than chronological criteria, English is the first language of Nigeria since it has functional priority over all other languages, foreign or indigenous, used in the country. As Sofenwa (1976) has observed, there is a general tendency in Nigeria to equate competence in English with overall scholastic accomplishment. Up to now, some Nigerians' definition of literacy is "ability to read and write English."

The private sector, public service, and institutions of higher learning make a pass (in most cases at credit level) in English a paramount entry condition. Whatever the candidate scores in his mother tongue is immaterial. Some Nigerian universities refuse to waive the English language condition even for candidates proposing to major in a Nigerian language. Our political system carries an unwritten law that makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the non-English-speaking Nigerian to be voted into any of our legislatures (at least at the national level) and perform his duty effectively. Non-English-speakers are therefore more likely to vote than be voted for, more likely to obey the law than to take part in the making of it. The lack of English has made them the unequal citizens of Nigeria's fragile democracy.

The contribution of the unconscientious stress on English to the educational underdevelopment of Nigeria is enormous and far-reaching. The system takes for granted that everybody must have an aptitude for a second language and whichever learner does not is faced with frustration even though he shows remarkable promise in other areas of study. Thus, the country has lost countless potential technologists, engineers, accountants, etc., whose professional hopes have been shattered by lack of flair for the master language. Often forgotten is the fact that indigenous professionals such as cloth-weavers, cloth-dyers, potters, and others flourish without the benefit of the English language, and that the *babalawo* plies through a thousand cryptic verses of Ifa without a word of English.

To make matters worse, the dominance of English is not

matched by a corresponding proficiency in the language, a defect due mainly to the manner of its acquisition (Ayo Banjo 1970). For most Nigerians the school is the place of first formal contact with English and for several more it is a language which bears a strong imprint of grammar workbooks and the blackboard. The learner's exposure to the language is severely limited, teaching staff is scarce, and teaching facilities are grossly inadequate (except in the very few government colleges where the future elite is nurtured in the art of aristocracy). Consequently, most Nigerians leave school with a meagre smattering of a language destined to rule their lives.

Meanwhile the school has devalued the mother tongue, thereby debasing the code (Bernstein 1973; Thornton 1974; Halliday 1974; Gregory and Carroll 1978) in which the Nigerian was socialized, a code in which he has learned to articulate his experience and verbalize his culture.

The result is that most Nigerians leave school with no language in the real sense of word, forced to face the world with two haphazard linguistic competences, neither of which is solid enough to see its possessor through the ordeals of social and intellectual life. One cannot but share Ubahakwe's fears (1973:86) that Nigeria is confronted with the imminent danger of a "linguistic vacuum."

The discrepancy between the dominance of English and competence in it has serious mental, psychological, and emotional repercussions. It causes anomie and a number of other complexes which undermine one's self-confidence. A recent newspaper report highlighted the plight of some members of Nigeria's legislatures, federal and state, who had never contributed to house debates, not because they were empty of ideas, but because they lacked the English to put them across. There are countless cases of "junior workers" soliciting help in the writing of application letters, or in answering queries from superior officers. In the educational domain many students keep mum rather than speak and be ridiculed for their grammatical mistakes. Truancy, depression, self-hatred, low esteem, and even suicide, are more likely with such students than their counterparts with better English proficiency. They are likely to show greater "cognitive deficit" (Lambert 1977:18), which is sure to affect their performance in other school subjects. English thus becomes the "battleground" of Nigeria's multilingualism, where the majority, lost for words, are sentenced to silence.

The smothering effect of English on the indigenous language also extends to the indigenous cultures; a fact hardly surprising since language and culture are intimately related. The higher the Nigerian goes on the educational ladder, the more intense

his acculturation in English, and the weaker his loyalty to the indigenous language and culture. Ubahakwe (1976) has aptly demonstrated that the higher the educational attainment of the English-Igbo bilingual, the more he thinks in English while writing Igbo. This is more than true of other Nigerians. By the time most Nigerians enter the university they have already lost written competence in their mother tongues and so we have the situation in which a young educated Nigerian writes letters in English to his non-literate parents, subjecting the unlettered recipients to the exploitation of the village interpreter.

The gap between town and country escalates into a chasm as young people on holiday from the city find it difficult to communicate effectively with their grandparents. This difficulty is due to something more than the so-called generation gap; it portends the death of the indigenous culture.

It appears that the country has its way of reacting to the awesome power of English. In the fifties and sixties a display of bombastic English attracted ovatory comments such as:

*O nso Gee!--He speaks (powerful) English!
Aboyinbokubtojo--One whose English rumbles like thunder.*

Today, in most parts of the countryside, these have changed into derisive and more ominous ejaculations:

*Oyinbo po!--Too much English!
Oyinbo repete!--Profuse English!*

More and more English is being seen as the language of deceit, corruption, exploitation, and socio-economic distance. During the present writer's recent visit to a village a non-literate farmer remarked that the First Republic fell because the politicians spoke "too much English."

Conclusion

English in Nigeria is a weapon of oppression and exclusion. It is a language spoken by about 10 percent of the population, yet most newspapers, most television programmes, and nearly all public notices are written in it. A non-English-speaking driver is fined or jailed for breaking a traffic code couched in English; a bank largely patronized by farmers and non-literate market women puts up notices warning, threatening, or thanking customers--all in English. The indigenous language is a linguistic untouchable to the elite who control these institutions.

Yet the people's language is the shortest and clearest way to their ears and their minds. Drastic but thoughtful measures are needed to solve the present language problem in the country

The indigenous languages need to be modernized, supplied with stable and simple orthographies, and brought into the mainstream of national life. They need to relieve English of many of its present roles. It is mental timidity and lack of linguistic vision to assume that most of the present domains of English cannot be taken over by indigenous languages.

The government has a duty to institute a progressive language policy to de-emphasize English and upgrade indigenous languages. Language loyalty is in most cases a function of language utility: Nigerians are not likely to cultivate interest in their mother tongues as long as these languages contribute little or nothing to their social, political, and economic advancement. There is a vital need to make Nigerians love and respect the indigenous languages and desist from thinking that English is the only language that matters.

English language studies in Nigeria need to venture beyond the present preoccupation with variety analysis and error computation. Concern here needs to spill over into the study of the impact of English on the indigenous languages (the converse has been the focus hitherto). Most important, research is needed in the possible correlation between educational failure and language failure in Nigeria.

The English language was used to colonize Nigeria. Now the English-speaking minority is using it to colonize the masses. With the present language situation Nigeria can hardly be the "just and egalitarian society" that the politicians talk about.

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