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CAN ENGLISH SERVE AS THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE OF SIERRA LEONE?

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ABSTRACT

Owing to its high number of languages and the arduous task of assigning functions to them, West Africa is known to be a linguistically complex region. This situation has made it possible for it to be awash with some peculiarities. For example, in Sierra Leone, like in the rest of West Africa, and contrary to what obtains in East African countries, successive governments have fought shy of declaring national languages. This is the existential reality even though every day the broadcasting stations in the country talk of national languages as is shown in the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (the nation's chief broadcaster) where public announcements are first read in English followed by the four 'national' languages namely Mende, Temne, Limba, and Krio in that order. This paper seeks to investigate why Sierra Leone like all the other countries in the sub-region does not have a language that can foster national integration. Fishman's notion (1972) of nation and nationality is used as a theoretical framework for this discussion. Through a tabular presentation, Fasold's (1984) proposed attributes of a national language are employed to explain why no language in Sierra Leone can be used for the purpose of national unity. A plus sign is used if the language has the attributes and a minus sign is used if it does not have the attributes. The test takes two phases; the first phase involves the four major indigenous languages which are cited above. They are examined separately to predict if they can serve as national languages. The second phase involves the English language. The results show that none of these languages is qualified to perform the national function in the country. In order to address this problem, the study offers some suggestions, which can apply not only to Sierra Leone, but to the sub-region as a whole.

Key Words: Educational Function, National (ist) Language Function, Wider Communication Function (lingua franca)

1.1. INTRODUCTION:

As a multilingual nation, Sierra Leone faces the task of assigning different functions to languages. These functions include the group function, the educational function, the national function, and the nationist function. More importantly, the leaders in the country have been facing the problem of national integration which involves inter alia issues relating to language and national identity. Today even though Mende, Temne, Limba and krio are regarded as the national languages in Sierra Leone, this applies only in terms of the educational function (. the Department of Education 1995) as there is no language in the country that performs the national function. This paper therefore seeks to account for the absence of an indigenous language in the country that performs the national function and to explain the possibility or

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otherwise for English to be a suitable contender in this respect. The term "national" is used in this study to mean "national unity".

Fishman's notion of nation and nationality (cited in Fasold, 1984) will be used as a framework for this discussion. According to Fishman "a nationality is a group of people who think of themselves as a social unit different from other groups but not just on a purely local scale (Fishman 1972:2 cited in Fasold, 1984). It can be inferred from this definition that a nationality does not necessarily require a political boundary. This distinguishes it from a nation which is "any political territorial unit, which is largely or increasingly under the control of a particular nationality."(Fishman, 1972:5, cited in Fasold, 1984:2). There is a close relationship between nationalism and nationality. The latter involves the feelings that spring from and collaborate with the former. Nationalism is fostered by components such as the history, culture and religion of a group of people. And language is directly related to each of these components. For example, language is not only an instrument but it is also a product of culture. Similarly, language is both a vehicle for the history of a nationality and part of that history itself. Fasold states that "these are emotional concepts but ones with immense power" (Fasold, 1984:3). The relevance of language in relation to nationalism can also be seen from the view that it serves the purpose of contrastive self-identification (Fishman, 1972). This is concerned with the notions of members of a nationality that they are united and identified with others who speak the same language and that they contrast with those who do not speak that language.

Fasold's (1984) six proposed sociolinguistic attributes of a national language are used to test the appropriateness or otherwise of the languages under review for the national language status. These attribute are the language should serve as a symbol of national identity for a sizeable and powerful proportion of the population; it can be used for some everyday unofficial purposes for a sizeable proportion of the population; it is spoken fluently and with ease by a sizeable proportion of the population; the major sociocultural groups have no alternative language. That is, any national aspirations the citizens develop will be associated with this one language; the language must be acceptable as a symbol of authenticity; and the language must be seen as a link with the glorious past.

1.2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The researcher uses a simple formula which involves a tabular presentation on the performance of a given language in relation to the attainment of the attributes of a national language. A plus sign is used if the language has the attributes and a minus sign is used if it does not have the attributes. The test takes two phases; the first phase involves the four major indigenous languages which are cited above. They are examined separately to predict if they can serve as national languages. The second phase involves the English language. The language that can fulfill the six proposed attributes will be regarded as ripe enough to perform the national function in the country.

1.3 THE RESULTS

Tables 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 show the performance of Mende, Temne, Limba Krio and English respectively in relation to their attributes to perform the national function.

TABLE 1: THE PERFORMANCE OF MENDE IN FULFILLING THE ATTRIBUTES OF A NATIONAL LANGUAGE

	ATTRUBUTES REQUIRED	ATTRIBUTES POSSESSED
1	Symbol of National Identity	–
2	Widely Used for Every Unofficial Purposes	–
3	Widely and Frequently Spoken	–
4	No Major Alternative Language	–
5	Symbol of Authenticity	+
6	Link with Glorious Past	+

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TABLE 2: THE PERFORMANCE OF TEMNE IN FULFILLING THE ATTRIBUTES OF A NATIONAL FUNCTION:

No	ATTRIBUTES REQUIRED	ATTRIBUTES POSSESSED
1	Symbol of National Identity	_
2	Widely Used for Everyday Unofficial Purposes	_
3	Widely and Frequently Spoken	_
4	No Major Alternative Language	_
5	Symbol of Authenticity	+
6	Link with Glorious Past	+

TABLE 3: THE PERFORMANCE OF LIMBA IN FULFILLING THE ATTRIBUTES OF A NATIONAL LANGUAGE

	ATTRIBUTES REQUIRED	ATTRIBUTES POSSESSED
1	Symbol of National Identity	_
2	Widely Used for Everyday Unofficial Purposes	_
3	Widely and Frequently Spoken	_
4	No Major Alternative Language	_
5	Symbol of Authenticity	+
6	Link with Glorious Past	+

TABLE 4: THE PERFORMANCE OF KRIO IN FULFILLING THE ATTRIBUTES OF A NATIONAL LANGUAGE:

	ATTRIBUTES REQUIRED	ATTRIBUTES POSSESSED
1	Symbol of National Identity	+
2	Widely Used for Everyday Unofficial Purposes	+
3	Widely and Frequently Spoken	+
4	No Major Alternative Language	_
5	Symbol of Authenticity	+
6	Link with Glorious Past	_

TABLE 5: THE PERFORMANCE OF ENGLISH IN FULFILLING THE ATTRIBUTES OF A NATIONAL LANGUAGE:

	ATTRIBUTES REQUIRED	ATTRIBUTES POSSESSED
1	Symbol of National Identity	_
2	Widely Used for Everyday Unofficial Purpose	_
3	Widely and Frequently Spoken	_
4	No Major Alternative Language	_
5	Symbol of Authenticity	+
6	Link with Glorious Past	_

Tables 1 to 4 showed the attributes of the four major languages in the country. The first three tables respectively illustrated the similar attributes of Mende, Temne,and Limba which not only served as both symbols of authenticity and connections with the country's glorious past, but they also not symbols of national identity ,not broadly used for common unofficial needs ,not widely and regularly spoken, and they did not have a major language that could replace them as a nationalist language. On the other hand, according to Table4 Krio could serve as a symbol of national identity; as a lingua franca, it was widely used for unofficial purpose; it was widely and regularly spoken in the country; and it was authentic which meant it had credibility as an authentic language but did not imply it had a fairly high degree of standardization. However, although there were other languages that could perform the group function in the country, there was no major alternative language to Krio in performing the nationalist function. . Finally, Krio did not remind Sierra Leoneans of a glorious past. With regard to

English, Table 5 showed it lacked all but one of the attributes of a national language. That is. Apart from being a highly standardized language, it was not viewed as a symbol of national identity in the country nor did Sierra Leoneans associate it with a glorious past. Moreover, a large proportion of the population did not use it for unofficial purpose and did not also use it frequently. Finally, no major language was alternative to it in terms of nationalist aspiration. It is clear from the above that none of the five languages highlighted in this study had fulfilled all the attributes required of a national language in Fasoldian terms.

1.4   THE DISCUSSION

It can be observed from the above tables that there is no indigenous language that can perform the national function in the country. In the first place, even the two languages that constitute the bulk of the country's population (i.e. Mende and Temne) cannot serve as a symbol of national identity. This is because their use is predominantly local and invariably limited to regions where they dominate. For example, according to the 2015 Population and Housing Census, in Mende dominated areas of the south and east which comprise Kailahun, Kenema, Bo, Bonthe, Pujehun, and Moyanba, the percentage of Mende speakers is recorded as 70.7, 83.4, 81.9, 72.4, 95.8 and 55.4 percent respectively. Similarly in Temne dominated areas of the north such as Kambia, Tonkolili and Portloko, the percentage of the language speakers is estimated at 54.8, 81.5 and 84.4 percent respectively. (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2017;25). Significantly, the census report also shows that the dominance of these languages is limited to specific regions because while the eastern region for instance is dominated by Mendes, Konos, and kissis who constitute 84 percent of the population, that of the Temnes is marginally low and constitutes about 5.0 percent. In the southern region, the dominance is almost exclusively shared between the Mendes (78.1 percent) and Shebros (6.2 percent) constituting a total of   84.3 percent. On the other hand whereas the northern region is dominated by the Temnes (57.0 percent), Limbas (13.8 percent) Korankos (10.1 percent) and Susus (5.8 percent) leading to a total of 86.7 percent, the Mendes (who

happen to be the largest in the country) are almost nonexistent representing only 1.1 percent of the region's Population. (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2017; 26).

On the other hand, Krio fulfills the second and third attributes of a national language. That is, firstly because it is used by a significant number of the population for unofficial purposes. It is in used for inter-ethnic communication by as much as 95 percent of the population. (Oyatade and Fashole Luke, 2007:128). Furthermore, considering its role as the unofficial lingua franca in the country, those who use it either as a mother tongue or a second language do so fluently and with relative ease. With regard to the fourth attribute, there is no indigenous language with which we can singularly associate national aspirations. In other words, the major languages can fulfill this attribute in terms of specific regions in the country and not the whole country: Mende can for example be associated with these aspirations in the Southern and Eastern Regions; the same can also be true of Temne and to some extent Limba in the Northern Region and Krio in the Western Area. Significantly, it is this criterion that debars Hindi from performing the national function in India (see Fasold 1984:74). In terms of authenticity some form of standardization has taken place in Mende, Temne, Limba and Krio. Today there are literary works in these languages and each language has teachers who are equipped with suitable methods and materials. As a result, they are now being taught in schools and colleges all over the country. Finally a study of Sierra Leone's glorious past which can be traced to pre-colonial time will be incomplete if the political, social and economic organizations of the Mendes , Temnes and Limbas are excluded, Krio, however, is not part of that proud history. Besides, the resistance struggle against colonialism is partly replete with lukewarm support on the part of the Krios (see Spitzer L. 1974 and Wyse A. J. G. 1989)

The above discussion explains why no indigenous language in the country can perform the nationalist function. Usually, a nationalist language is so declared by decree or by legislation as was the case of Kiswahili in Tanzania and Kenya. Significantly, there is no case in Sierra Leone and in the whole of

the sub-region where a language has been allowed to perform the national function. This is because this venture is fraught with problems. This is for example evident in Nida and Wonderly's (1971:65) comment on pre-1963 Nigeria, cited in Bamgbose (1991:23):

In Nigeria, there is no politically neutral language. In fact, the division into three major regions reflects three language Poles, Hausa, Yoruba, Ibo. The political survival of Nigeria as a country would be even more seriously threatened than it is *if any one of these three languages were promoted by the Government as being the one national language* (emphasis mine).

Dadze (2011:2) predicts a similar fate for Ghanaians if they were to adopt Twi as a national language, in spite of its potentialities in that respect :But any attempt to make Twi a national language will be fiercely resisted even though it is a language spoken as widely in Ho as in Kumasi."

Owing to this existential reality in Sub-Saharan Africa, a case has often been made for the use of the ex-colonial language (that is, English, French and Portuguese) as a national language for the purpose of national integration. Bamgbose (1991:23) cites Alexander (1972:87) who advocates the use of the ex-colonial language in this regard as it is emotionally neutral since it belongs to no local tribe but rather can be drawn from peoples of different ethnic groups. This situation is evident in Ghana for example where "its wide geographical spread, as well as psychological acceptance and official sanction, makes it a tool for national unity." (Gyasi, 1990:24)

In Sierra Leone, English performs both the national and the educational functions. Proficiency in English is therefore a requirement of a typical educated Sierra Leonean. Pemagbi (1989) neatly sums up the importance of English in the country when he states that:

Even though English is not native to Sierra Leone, its functions are as crucial to the country's survival as they are to where it is used as a mother tongue (Pemagbi, 1989).

With regard to its suitability for the national function, English occupies a favourable position because of its neutrality. That is, the educated Sierra Leoneans come from the different regions of the country. This is a significant advantage considering the regional divide in the country. Besides, English fulfills Fasold's fifth attribute of language authenticity as it has a rich literary tradition. For example, it has a standard orthography and a literature. Today, it is the world's most important and widely spread international language with a continued `

However, as English is non-indigenous in Sierra Leone, it does not fulfill most of the requirements to perform the nationalist function. In the first place, it was introduced to Sierra Leon by missionaries and colonialists. As a result, it cannot be a part of Sierra Leone pre-colonial history nor can Sierra Leoneans use it to develop the required feelings for nationalism. English cannot in effect connect Sierra Leoneans with a glorious past which can help to identify them as belonging to a nationality distinct from other nationalities. Thus, English does not fulfill the first and sixth attributes which are respectively concerned with serving as a symbol of national identity for sizeable and powerful proportion of the population and connecting the people with a glorious past. This historical criterion is particularly significant because according to Jowitt (1994; 36) while English in Nigeria is deeply entrenched in the country's life in most domains, the fact that it is a colonial legacy "automatically rules (it) out as a candidate for the status of national language" furthermore, the rate of illiteracy in the country is high. Besides, the few educated Sierra Leoneans use the language mainly for official purposes. As a result, the language does not fulfill the second and third attributes of a national language.

1.5 CONCLUSIONS

Assigning a given function to a specific language is often dictated by the underlying political and social realities of the society in which the language is found. Westway (1991:1) cites Gorman (1974) who express this view when he states that: "Decision on language use in a particular society is almost invariably subordinate to or a reflection of underlying political and social values and goals." This

probably explains why even though Jomo Kenyatta declared Kenya as a national language by decree; he did not choose Kikuyu which constituted about 20% of the country's population. Apparently, the ethnic composition of the country made any other choice too difficult and dangerous. (Wardhaugh, 1986:346). Against this background, since Sierra Leone has been described as a polarized state (see Desalegn 2012 European Union Election Observation Mission2018) declaring any one of the major indigenous languages of the country as a national language will be a hazardous step, nor can declaring English as such make the situation better. It will therefore be necessary to slightly modify the status quo wherein English continues to serve the official and educational functions, Krio as the official lingua franca and Mende, Temne and Krio as media of school subjects in schools and colleges. Since Krio has been serving as the unofficial lingua franca with little or no reservations from the citizens, declaring that status official will likely have no negative impact on the country. More importantly perhaps, considering the pervasive roles which English has been performing in Sierra Leone, it is high time it shared some of these functions with the indigenous languages as it is the case in South Africa where ten indigenous languages contend with English for the official status and some East African countries like Kenya and Tanzania where Swahili performs the national and educational functions among others. However, linguists will see this as unattainable dream if Fasold's criteria mentioned above are not considered.

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