Language Imperialism and the Quest for National Identity: A Pedagogical Implications in ESL Setting

Moshood Zakariyah

Abstract

The interface between cultural orientation of non-native speakers of the English language, where it co-exists alongside indigenous languages and how this complex phenomenon impacts on teaching of the English language is the thrust of this paper. Resting on applied linguistic orientation, the paper examines how the English language displays imperialistic traits as a dominant language at the expense of the indigenous languages and the quest for non-native speakers of the English language to maintain their socio-cultural identity. Samples are drawn from lexical items that mean different things in both native and non-native contexts. Findings reveal that not all rules (grammatical and otherwise) of the English language in a second language settings are linguistic. Some of the rules, based on which notions such as correctness/incorrectness, appropriate/inappropriate, etc are imposed reflections of cultural practice, particularly of the native speakers of the language. The study concludes that cultural diversity of language users should be prioritised in determine what and how to teach the English language in second language setting to protect the cultural identity of the host communities.

Keywords: Linguistic imperialism, National identity, Teaching of English, English as a second language setting, Pedagogy

Background to the Study

Defining language is as difficult as defining life (Encyclopaedia of Language, p. 400). It is usually a daunting challenge which has remained the subject of linguistic enquiries to date. Consequently, there are avalanche of definitions of language but a few from the viewpoint of sociolinguistics are examined. Trager (1949) defines language as "a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which the members of a society interact in terms of their total culture". It is a complex system of communication that is shaped by social factors such as culture, context, and power dynamics. Language is not just a neutral medium for conveying information but is deeply rooted in the social context in which it is used. It is a means through which human socialization process takes place and a vehicle

of projecting the socio-cultural identity of its users. Language is also seen as a means of exercising power and control, with dominant groups often imposing their language on marginalized groups. Additionally, language can be used to resist oppression and assert identity.

Quoting Cook and Seidlhofer (1954), Adedimeji (2010, p.17) postulates that language is:

> Man's all-in-all as a genetic inheritance, a mathematical system, a social fact, the expression of individual identity, the expression of cultural identity, the outcome of dialogic inheritance, a social semiotic, the intuitions of native speakers, the sum attested data, a collection of memorized chunks, a rule governed discrete combinatory system of electrical activation in a distributed network.

It is clear from the above definitions that there is a strong tie between language and society. This tie, which is often taken for granted, is multifaceted and dynamic in nature. The system and pattern of communication in multilingual societies such as Nigeria where the English language and several other indigenous languages co-exist deserve special research attention, particularly in relation to teaching and learning. This implies that the interface between the world view of the Nigerian people, mostly shaped by the provision of their indigenous linguistic choices, and the teaching and learning for which the English language is the medium of expression deserve a special place in language related research.

According to Whorf (1956), "Language shapes the way we think and determines what we can think about". It is an instrument of socialisation and a vehicle of cultural identity and values transmission. It is through language that values system of its users known, nurtured and protected. These values are passed down from one generation to another. However, construction of cultural values changes over time, particularly in multilingual societies. This is partly because the prevailing local language(s) and the foreign language (such as English, French, and Portuguese) do not project the same cultural reality and values.

It is worthy of note that both language and society influence each other. Hence, the study of how society influences language is called sociolinguistics, the study how language influences society is known as sociology of language. This study adopts a sociolinguistic perspective as aspect of sociology of language is not considered. Sociolinguistics studies how societal variables such as age, gender, status, and others, affect language. It is the branch of linguistics where attention is paid to how language reveals the identity of its users. It is a sub-field of applied linguistics devoted to the study of connection between language as determined by the cultural reality of its users. Attesting to this fact, Holmes (2008, p.365) posits that language users carry enormous cultural baggage along with them as they use language. This implies that language and culture are inseparable. Hence, language is often described as being culturally transmitted. This view is expressed in Wierzbicka (1991) and Zakariyah (2016).

Linguistic Imperialism

Linguistic imperialism refers to the process of promoting a dominant language at the expense of marginalized languages, often resulting in language shift, cultural erasure, and social inequality. It refers to instances where a code considered 'prestige' due to political, economic, social, and scientific influence dominates and controls the minority languages. This phenomenon is not limited to a particular language as there are many instances of such linguistic habit. Examples include Mandarin Chinese, English, French, Portuguese and other languages of global influence. Often, the dominant languages have numerical advantages over the dominated ones. For instance, Mandarin Chinese has the highest number of native users. English language has highest number of users in the world, comprising native users (inner circle), second language users (outer circle, and foreign language situation/setting (extended circle (Kachru 1985). In addition, domineering languages are often associated with political influence as in the case of English over the territory colonized by Britain. The same thing could be said of French, Portuguese and Spanish. Furthermore, languages that dominate are economically viable than the dominated ones. The above reasons account for why some languages are considered more prestigious than others even though from the sociolinguistic even though from the sociolinguistic viewpoint, no language is superior to others.

The concept of linguistic imperialism is considered from two different dimensions in this paper, the macro-linguistic imperialism, and micro-linguistic imperialism. At the macro level, imperialism occurs when languages of global influence such as English, French and Chinese are imposed on users at the expense of indigenous languages. The micro level of linguistic imperialism obtains when a dominant language impacts negatively on the value system and norms of the host community. This pattern of dominance is initiated through changes in meanings of lexical components, a linguistic phenomenon also regarded as semantic shift and/ or semantic extension. This occurs when a domesticated version of an imposed language is threatened by certain changes in the 'prestige' version of the language. Such threats are non-linguistic as they reflect some aspects of the cultural norms of the users of the 'prestige' version. A good example of this is when expressions that conform with the indigenous cultural values are viewed as substandard, inappropriate, or better still; incorrect.

The Concept of National Identity

National identity refers to the sense of belonging, connection, and loyalty that individuals feel towards their nation, country, or state. It encompasses the shared values, beliefs, history, culture, language, and traditions that define a nation and its people. National identity is a complex and multifaceted concept that can be influenced by various factors such as history and heritage, language and literature, culture and customs, among others. National identity can shape individuals' perceptions of themselves and their place within the nation, influencing their sense of belonging, pride, and loyalty. It can also

impact how nations interact with each other and how they define their interests and priorities. National identity is not fixed and can evolve over time, adapting to different social, political, and cultural contexts.

Causes of Linguistic Imperialism

The following are some of the causes of linguistic imperialism.

1. Colonization: European powers imposed their languages on colonized territories, suppressing indigenous languages.
2. Globalization: English has become the global language of business, education, and science, marginalizing local languages.
3. Language policy: Governments promote dominant languages through education, media, and official language policies.
4. Economic power: Economic dominance leads to language dominance, as countries with economic power spread their languages.
5. Cultural hegemony: Dominant cultures promote their languages as superior, marginalizing local cultures.
6. Advancement in science and technology: Developed nations with robust education standard often have edge over less developed countries in science and technology. This advantage makes dominated languages to be subservient and marginalized

Features of Linguistic Imperialism

This phenomenon has been a hallmark of colonialism, globalization, and cultural hegemony. The features of language imperialism are multifaceted and far-reaching, affecting not only language but also culture, identity, and power dynamics. One of the primary features of language imperialism is the imposition of a dominant language as the language of power, prestige, and opportunity. This language becomes the medium of instruction in schools, the language of government and administration, and the language of business and commerce. As a result, speakers of marginalized languages are forced to adapt to the dominant language to access education, employment, and social mobility.

Another feature of language imperialism is the suppression of indigenous languages and cultures. The dominant language is often imposed at the expense of local languages, leading to language shift, language loss, and cultural erasure. This results in the marginalization of indigenous cultures, histories, and identities. It also perpetuates linguistic and cultural homogenization. The dominant language becomes the norm, and speakers of other languages are expected to conform to this norm. This leads to a loss of linguistic diversity, cultural diversity, and intellectual diversity.

Furthermore, language imperialism is often accompanied by cultural imperialism,

where the dominant culture is imposed over marginalized cultures. This results in the erasure of cultural identities, histories, and traditions. In addition, Language imperialism also perpetuates power dynamics, where speakers of the dominant language hold power and prestige over speakers of marginalized languages. This leads to social inequality, economic inequality, and political inequality.

Internationality of the English language and ESL Setting

English language is a second or foreign language in Nigeria as it is in many places where its users are non-native. The concepts of ESL/EFL are introduced to typify linguistic circumstances where people their code of communication before their contact with English language. In such circumstances, English is undoubtedly a foreign language to the locals but may be second or third language some individuals. For instance, people who acquired two or more indigenous languages before having contact with English cannot have English as their second language.

English originated from Indo-European language family. Most indigenous Nigerian languages belong to Niger-Congo and Afro-Asiatic (See Encyclopaedia of Language). Apart from the differences in their etymology, the languages differ in many respects in conformity with different ethnic identities which they project. As one of the languages with highest number of users across the globe (Greenbaum and Nelson, 2002), English has adapted to the prevailing social circumstances of its host communities. This is a case of India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, South Africa, and Nigeria to mention but a few.

The conformist nature of the English language with the social reality of the Nigerian people aligns with Smith (1970) cited in Tan et al (2019)'s proposal of "English as an International Auxiliary Language (EIAL), defining an 'international language' as one which is used by people different nations to communicate with one another". He made several assumptions, one of which posits that non-native learners of English do not need to internalise the cultural norms of native speakers of English. The same sentiment is echoed by Tsuchiya (2016) cited in Alam (2022) acknowledging the diversity of speech and practices in different ethnic community in the world as a basis of determining how language is used.

Linguistic Imperialism: The Nigerian Example

The significance of the English language in Nigeria occupies a vintage position on any academic discourse regarding the subject matter. It has received commendable literary attention for making the socialization process in the country not only possible but simple to manage. One can only imagine what the chaotic linguistic and social situation in the country will be without English, judging by numerous ethnic nationalities and the high level of linguistic diversity of the Nigerian people. It is on this note that English language is considered as a treasured gem in the heart of Nigeria, a nation teeming with diverse ethnic groups and languages. It serves as a unifying force, bridging the communication gap among the country's vibrant cultures. English is the thread that weaves together the

tapestry of Nigerian society, fostering national unity and understanding.

As the official language, English language plays a vital role in government, education, law, and official ceremonies. It is the language of the legislature, the judiciary, and the executive, facilitating the smooth functioning of the government. In the educational sector, English is the medium of instruction, providing students with a window to the world, access to global knowledge, and opportunities. It is the language of business, commerce, and international trade in Nigeria, facilitating economic transactions and connections with the global economy. It is the language of the marketplace, the boardroom, and the financial sector, enabling Nigerians to participate in the global economic landscape. Beyond its practical applications, English language is a symbol of Nigerian 'national' identity, reflecting the country's history, culture, and aspirations. It is a reminder of the nation's colonial past, its struggles, and its triumphs. English is a language of opportunity, providing access to better education, jobs, and socio-economic advancement.

As evident in numerous functions of English mentioned above, the language is indeed a source of blessing to Nigerians in all walks of life. Because of its age-long presence and significance, its popularity in Nigeria and beyond has received some recognition which has given birth to a variety called Nigerian English. Nigerian English is a domesticated or nativized version of English language which some Nigerian socio-cultural and linguistic flavour or colouration. English language is a precious gift to Nigeria, fostering national unity, economic growth, education, global connectivity, and cultural exchange.

Its significance extends beyond communication to symbolize 'national' identity, social mobility, and opportunities for advancement. By embracing English as a treasured asset, Nigeria can unlock its full potential and take its rightful place on the global stage. However, despite the above mentioned numerous significant roles of English language in Nigeria, it is a case of 'not all that glitters is gold'. There are many angles through which the imposition of English as the official language in Nigeria has affected and still affecting the indigenous languages. The nature and implications of this imposition are examined.

Promotion of Gender Neutrality

In contemporary English, gender identity is being redefined in a way that people can be identified as they are pleased, often in flagrant disobedience of natural gender classification as encapsulated in all or nearly all indigenous cultures in Nigeria. That a male could be addressed as 'she/her' and vice versa is alien to Nigerian indigenous cultures. It is somewhat grammatically illogical to conceive that only a third person plural pronoun (they) should be used in places where he/him or she/her are supposed to be used. Consider the following examples:

a. If **he or she** is coming to the concert, kindly inform me on time. (inappropriate)
b. If they are coming to the concert, kindly inform me on time. (appropriate)

That a person is entitled to be identified as wish or that a person chooses to conceal

his/her gender identity might be allowed in the West is not the contention. The point here is that there is nothing linguistic about the appropriateness or otherwise of the two sentences above. What determines their appropriateness or otherwise is not linguistic. While this practice is accepted and considered as standard in the Western world, its imposition on the generality of users of English in second language situations such as Nigeria amounts to flagrant disregard for cultural diversity of the Nigerian people. While this study does not challenge the validity of the acceptance among the native speakers of English, it is of the view that such linguistic imperialistic practice should be resisted in all ramifications. Such practice, if not checked, will lead to linguistic prescriptivism which does not have a place in the principles of modern linguistics.

Age as a Respect Marker

In most indigenous languages and cultures in Nigeria, age is an important social variable, and it plays special roles in meaning explication. In Africa generally, language use is gravely influenced by age of the users. Discussions between people of different age brackets in most languages and cultures in Nigeria are often laced with respect markers. This fact underscores the level of significance attached to age as a sociolinguistic variable. Examine the following examples:

a. My **senior** brother who lives in Canada arrives tomorrow.
b. My **older** brother who lives in Canada arrives tomorrow.

Grammatically, nothing is wrong with either of the above two sentences. The choice of use only depends on the cultural context of users, and since cultures differ from one place to another, there is bound to be standard variants of the same expression. Since language and thought are inseparable (see Yule, 1995, Coupland 2001), the semantic realisation of the above sentences cannot be the same because the lexical items that paradigmatically determined project different thought in the mind of language users. The word 'senior' culturally connotes sense of power/authority, while 'elder' implies mere difference of age. What this implies is that the meaning of the second sentence is subsumed in the first and there is no basis to label one appropriate and the other inappropriate under any guise of grammatical rules.

Negative Use of Inverted Comma

The pattern of using inverted comma with reference to certain words belonging to indigenous languages typified lowering or reducing the linguistic status of the languages. The use of certain indigenous lexis particularly in relation to diet/cuisine should be promoted to gain international recognition. Popular use of lexis by hundreds of millions of language users will automatically command international respect. The following are example of words highly popularised by their native users and eventually gained international respect as global values:

a. Curry (Indian/Sri Lankan)
b. Spaghetti (Italian)
c. Pizza (Italian)
d. Jollof (Senegal/Gambia)

It is amazing that none of the above cuisine related words are written with inverted comma in so called standard variety. They are accepted as appropriate despite their non-European etymologies. The same measure of success could still be achieved by other non-English lexis of many indigenous languages.

Family Ties

Kinship and family ties are projected differently from culture to another and the associated meaning to kinship related words do not project the same social reality. This implies that meaning explication is determined by choices made in terms of lexical items. Consider the following examples:

a. Is Micheal your **half-brother**?
b. Her **half-sister** has travelled abroad.
c. They met their **stepmother** at the event.

The above examples do not project actual kinship reality that is not in line with the cultural practice of the Europeans. Half-brother and half-sister are alien, illogical, and contradicts the established cultural order. It should be borne in mind that kinship tie is strong generally in Africa, and in Nigeria in particular. The concept or reality of half-brotherhood Is not known to most cultures in Nigeria.Therefore, this understanding of meaning realities must be learnt by or taught to any learners of an African indigenous language, specifically in Nigeria, so as not to directly impose or apply the English language semantics to it.

Pedagogical Implications of Linguistic Imperialism

Teaching English as a second language (ESL) has significant pedagogical implications that impacts the learning process and student outcomes. Effective ESL instruction requires a deep understanding of linguistic, cultural, and cognitive factors that influence language acquisition. One, to ensure clarity of concepts taught; the English language should be tailored in a way that conforms with native intelligence and world view. Examples provided should be culturally meaningful, understood and impactful in terms of values system of a speech community. This goes a long way in ensuring positive language attitude of learners and sustainability of their interest in learning.

Firstly, ESL teachers must recognize the diverse linguistic backgrounds and proficiency levels of their students. This awareness enables teachers to tailor instruction to meet individual needs, fostering a supportive learning environment. Differentiated instruction, scaffolding, and feedback become essential strategies to promote language

development. Recognition of cultural diversity, respect of individual differences and the need to promote the concept of global citizenship which recognises the significance of all cultures should be made a bedrock for the teaching of English all second or foreign language situations. This implies that cultural sensitivity and awareness are crucial in ESL teaching. Teachers must acknowledge the cultural nuances and values that shape students' language use and behaviour. By incorporating culturally relevant materials and activities, teachers can build bridges between students' prior knowledge and new language skills. This further implies that derogatory remarks regarding certain cultural practices due to cultural diversity, as a matter of necessity, must be avoided. This is because Africans attach so much importance to their language and culture.

In addition, ESL instruction must address cognitive factors, such as learning styles, motivation, and prior knowledge. Teachers should utilize a range of instructional methods, including visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic approaches, to engage students and facilitate language acquisition. Instructional methods should vary in recognition of diverse nature of the learners and as a weapon to measure their level of understanding. Concerted efforts must be made to ensure that inadequacies, incompetence or inappropriateness on the part of learners should not be seen as a single determinant of intelligence level of learners. This is imperative as teachers often erroneously use competence in language as a basis of determining learners' level of intelligence. Research have proven otherwise.

Also, technology integration can enhance ESL instruction, providing access to authentic materials, interactive resources, and communication tools. This enables students to develop digital literacy and global connectivity. This provides a veritable platform for showcasing different cultural practice, ensuring easy access to information, foster unity across the world. It is also a strong basis to create wealth through tourism and recreation activities. Thus, it provides economic advantages for many African countries where the English language co-exists, albeit, as a dominant language. This could further impact positively on the communicative competence of the local people in the English language, as they stand the chance of coming in close contact with the native speakers through tourism.

Furthermore, assessment and evaluation in ESL contexts require careful consideration. Teachers must use a variety of assessment tools, including diagnostic, formative, and summative measures, to accurately gauge language proficiency and inform instruction. The basis for this approach is to be dynamic in teaching and be efficient in assessment to ensure accuracy. This is to ensure a correlation between language proficiency and cognitive development premised on the socio-cultural reality of the users.

Lastly, ongoing professional development and collaboration among ESL teachers are essential for staying current with best practices, sharing effective strategies, and supporting student success. Exposing students/learners to international standard while appreciating the local content should be encouraged. The concepts of local acceptability where expressions that are culturally meaningful and relevant are recognised, while the international intelligibility is equally promoted. This affords the users of English as a second language the opportunity to function efficiently in the above two linguistic instances. Thus,

teaching English as a second language demands a nuanced understanding of linguistic, cultural, cognitive, and technological factors. By acknowledging and addressing these pedagogical implications, teachers can create inclusive, engaging, and effective learning environments that foster language development and student achievement.

Other Implications of Linguistic Imperialism

Linguistic imperialism has far-reaching implications that affect not only language but also culture, identity, power dynamics, and social justice. The dominance of a single language over others leads to linguistic and cultural homogenization, suppressing the diversity of languages and cultures. One of the significant implications of linguistic imperialism is language shift and language loss. As the dominant language becomes the language of power and opportunity, speakers of marginalized languages are forced to abandon their languages and cultures to access education, employment, and social mobility. This results in language loss, cultural erasure, and the marginalization of indigenous cultures.

Linguistic imperialism also perpetuates cultural imperialism, where the dominant culture is imposed over marginalized cultures. This leads to cultural homogenization, erasing cultural identities, histories, and traditions. The dominant culture becomes the norm, and marginalized cultures are forced to conform to this norm. The implications of linguistic imperialism also extend to power dynamics. Speakers of the dominant language hold power and prestige over speakers of marginalized languages, perpetuating social inequality, economic inequality, and political inequality. This leads to a lack of representation, marginalization, and exclusion of speakers of marginalized languages from decision-making processes and resources.

Furthermore, linguistic imperialism has implications for social justice. Language is a fundamental human right, and the suppression of languages is a violation of this right. The dominance of a single language over others perpetuates linguistic and cultural homogenization, leading to social injustice and cultural erasure. In addition, linguistic imperialism has implications for education, employment, and economic development. The dominance of a single language in education perpetuates language shift and language loss, limiting access to education and employment opportunities for speakers of marginalized languages. This perpetuates economic inequality and limits economic development.

Finally, linguistic imperialism has implications for global communication and understanding. The dominance of a single language perpetuates linguistic and cultural homogenization, limiting global communication and understanding. This leads to a lack of understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures and languages, perpetuating stereotypes and prejudices.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, linguistic imperialism has far-reaching implications that affect

language, culture, identity, power dynamics, social justice, education, employment, economic development, and global communication. This is particularly true of places or situations where English is either a second or foreign language. It is essential to recognize and challenge linguistic imperialism to promote linguistic diversity, cultural diversity, and social justice. Therefore, the objective of the paper is to sensitise all stakeholders in education sector to the need to develop and sustain a robust symbiotic relationship between English and Nigerian local languages. This is achievable when we leverage on the advantages of the multilingual and diverse ethnolinguistic nature of the country.

In order words, it is to awake the linguistic consciousness of language users not only to aspire to attain the competence of international standard but also to retain their indigenous socio-cultural and linguistic identity. This is important particularly in the era of erosion of indigenous cultural values dues to globalisation and widening economic and technological gap between the dominant and dominated cultures. Premised on the above submission, conscious and systemic efforts should be put in place through proper language policy to mitigate both the immediate and remote consequences of linguistic imperialism. In a more succinct way, the following recommendations are postulated.

The Nigerian people irrespective of class, gender, religion, and level of educational attainment should be sensitised on the need for socio-cultural and linguistic identity. People who have aversion for their indigenous language should be educated. Several advantages of speaking different languages such as economic, security and social relevance should be emphasised. Several international job opportunities where polyglots are needed are enough evidence to drive home this point. Taking some advantages of contrastive analytical approach to language study, language experts should be charged with the responsibility of producing instructional materials for students/learners of English in ESL setting, bearing in mind the multilingual and diverse ethnic composition of the Nigerian linguistic topography. All the above measure should be put in place to ensure habitable language ecology for the English language and Nigerian indigenous languages, particularly in this era of digital literacy and globalisation.

References

Adedimeji, M. A. (2010). A Stylo-pragmatic study of proverbs in selected Nigerian novels in English. A Ph.D. Thesis Submitted to the Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Ilorin, Ilorin.

Alam, S. (2022). Imagine, integrate, incorporate: English language and its pedagogical implications in EFL classroom. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*. Available online at upkatha.com/v14n210/

Crystal, D. (1997). *The Cambridge encyclopedia of language*. Second edition. Cambridge University Press.

Greenbaum, S. and Nelson, G. (2002). *An introduction to English grammar*. London: Pearson Education Limited.

Holmes, J. (2008). *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. London: Pearson Longman.

Kachru, B. (1985). Standard, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English Language in the Outer circle. Quirk R. & Widdowson, H. G. (Eds.) *English in the world: Teaching and learning the language and literature*. Cambridge University, Press, p. 11 – 30.

Tan, K. H., Farashaiyan, A., Sahragard, R. (2019). Implications of English as an international language for language pedagogy. *International Journal of Higher Education*. DOI:10.5430/ijhe.v9n1p22

Yule, G. (2022). *The study of language*. Eight Edition. Cambridge University Press.

Whorf, B.L. (1956) Linguistic relativity. Carroll, B.L., Lee, P., Levinson, S. C. (Eds). *Language, thought, and reality: A collection of Whorf's writings*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Wierzbicka, A. (1991). *Cross-cultural pragmatics*. Mouton de Gruyter.

Zakariyah, M. (2016). A Pragmatic analysis of proverbs in selected works of Ola Rotimi. Ph.D. Thesis Submitted to the Department of English and Literary Studies, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.