

# SOCIOLINGUISTIC DIMENSIONS OF URBANIZATION IN SELECTED NIGERIAN MULTILINGUAL SOCIETIES

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## Abstract

The major preoccupation in this paper is to examine the sociolinguistic dimensions of urbanization in selected Nigerian multilingual societies. The motivation for this work stems from the following sociolinguistic realities: for every user of a language migrating into another speech community, his or her language stands at the threshold of dual threat; first, back way at home, the number of speakers of the language has undoubtedly dropped by that digit individual; secondly, the same individual will be faced with the hard choice of learning or using a new language in order to define his relevance in the new linguistic environment; or live with his ethno-linguistic chauvinism for his first language and consequently cripple his socio-economic potential. The data were sourced as sociolinguistic inventory and analysed to reveal their relative effects on the languages in contacts. Our findings are that while the majority languages (or the regionally major languages or the languages of wider communication) continue to gain more speakers, the languages of immigrant speakers to the urban centres are steadily losing members of their speech community. This is because the migrating speakers do not readily find (a) speakers of their languages in the new urban environments, (b) the linguistic fields, and (c) speech events where they can interact regularly. Their functionality in their first languages, therefore, does suffer attrition.

**Key Words:** Urbanisation, Multilingual, Society, Sociolinguistics, Non-linguistic

## Introduction

Linguists will agree that no meaningful discussion of a multilingual phenomenon can take place outside urban centres.

According to Adekunle (1995:73), the administrative, commercial, industrial and political activities which bring together people with different linguistic backgrounds take place in these city centres. Outside the towns and cities, communities tend to be monolingual since the population is usually homogeneous. An urban centre represents the concentration within a relatively small area of social institutional factors that are capable of promoting economic development. As a close system, urbanization is viewed as a social setting in which the multiplier effect operates cumulatively to generate development. The multiplier effects are the social and institutional factors which act together as catalysts for emergent development. This social process seeks, through maximum specialization, to increase the output of goods and services from minimized input in a community under crucial conditions of surplus food. By 'specialization', the writer means industrialization which serves as bait for urbanization and because man is involved, communication is inevitable. And with each new person entering into the urban city, the already multilingual-multi-cultural setting is further stretched or complicated. Without a careful planning and intervening decisive political-will to implement the language policy, urbanism especially in developing nations will continue to be a breeding plant of social vices.

Urbanization and the growth of cities occur together. Geography experts believe that urbanization is the process of increasing the total population concentration of urban settlements (Adalemo, 1977:72; Ekwere, 1988:13). Ekwere (1988) reasoned that it is a mistake for anyone to think that urbanization is simply the growth of cities. He argues that once the total population is composed of both urban and rural population, the proportion is a function of the factors. Ekwere (1988) adds that cities can grow without any urbanization, provided that the rural population grows at an equal or greater rate.

According to Adams (1966:206), urbanization in our day is widely regarded as synonymous with pronounced social heterogeneity, secularism of outlook, impersonality of an increasing proportion of interpersonal contacts, and preoccupation with non-subsistence

pursuits. Like the previous ones, this very definition can be amplified in the following terms: Urbanization is an increasing growth in the population of the urban areas at the expense of the rural areas. This growth is not bound by uniformity in terms of tribe, religion or any social consideration, except for the economic and industrial benefits the immigrants enjoy or expect. Adalemo (1977:72) sums it this way: "...growth takes place within the benefits from the process of urbanization." From the foregoing, one can now say that urbanization is not just the growth of cities but when such growth is impersonally heterogeneous, and leads to area expansion of the urbanized area.

### **Origin of Urbanization**

The origin of man is still shrouded in mystery. However, traces of the modern man date back to over a million years ago. This was found in Africa i.e. "the cradle of the human species" (Harrison & Sullivan, 1971:3). Man had lived through different historical ages. Notable among these are the "Old Stone Age" and the "New Stone Age". The Old Stone Age is also called the Palaeolithic society. This age was characterized by the acquisition of the knowledge and skills to create weapons from stones and woods; making man an effective killer. In this age, man lived essentially as a hunter and food gatherer. Only a little is known about the intelligence of man at this age. Evidence, however, shows that man had developed religious concepts because he held the belief that spirits existed and that his own survival depended on appeasing these spirits.

According to Harrison and Sullivan (1971: 5), The New Stone Age which is called the Neolithic society often questions "how, when and where" these changes first occurred. But it is a known fact that agricultural activities first appeared in southwest Asia about 11,000 years ago. During this time, man started adapting to changing conditions and, thus, became a farmer instead of a hunter only. This era saw man living a settled life permanently in villages instead of the wanderer that he was. Hence, he developed and provided for his new

and complex needs. The peak of his development in this age was the creation of tribal government by man.

During the 4th and 3rd Millennium B.C., men discovered a new ambience in quest of their improved condition. And in the great river valley systems of the Near East, China and India, there existed a physical environment offering opportunity for a more bounteous harvest from human action if men could organise their activities to capitalize on this potential. The result of this action was the development of urban societies embracing much larger groupings of people than had the older Neolithic agricultural villages. The urbanization of life around the near and far Eastern river valleys constituted the major land mark in inaugurating the history of civilization in the proper sense of the term. In other words, the social, economic and political techniques, technical skills and religious practices served as the basis upon which life in the emergent cities was constructed. The transition from Neolithic village societies to urban civilization occurred first in the Tigris- Euphrates valley around 4000BC. The cause for this growth, according to Harrison and Sullivan (1971:9), is still an issue for considerable debate among historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists.

However, what we regard as urbanization originated from the Tigris-Euphrates valley of Mesopotamia, the Indus valley and the Nile valley of Egypt. The Mesopotamian civilization came into being as a result of the ability of organized communities to construct an irrigation system which allowed them to capitalize on the agricultural potential of “the land between the rivers”. Etymologically, “Mesopotamia” is a word of Greek origin meaning “the land between rivers”. The Tigris and the Euphrates took their sources in the Armenian highland from where they flow south-ward in roughly parallel paths to the Persian Gulf.

Ancient Greece was the first to develop what we now refer to as “city”. This was around the 800 B.C. It began with the building of the palace called the citadel in Athen and then the Temple called Acropolis. These features were also built in Sparta, another Greek city. This development justifies the claims that the oldest cities in the world are

in Greece. Unlike the Greek's aesthetic architectural features, Roman civilization lacked real developmental strategy because of its political motives for which it was notable. The Roman Empire was notable for its expansionist and domineering tendency; hence the intrusion of Indo-Europeans from the north. Harrison and Sullivan (1971:83) state that "the new comers imposed their political system on the native population, and their language ultimately became predominant. However, the conquerors adopted from the natives the basic features of agricultural life, so that no radical changes occurred."

They explain that there was a written language used chiefly as a device for recording the king's dealings with their subjects, which had been perfected by modern scholars who labelled it "linear B". In fact, it is erroneous for anyone to think that the underdeveloped world never experienced urbanization until the colonial activities and the attendant civilization. According to Mabogunje (1980:150), it must not be assumed that all parts of the underdeveloped world have no urban centres of their own prior to their colonization by European powers. He argues that well-organized social politics in parts of Asian and West Africa with traditional urban centres had established a mechanism for articulating and accumulating surplus from surrendering rural areas well before the colonial period. Mabogunje further observes that the colonial administration only superimposed itself on the traditional political elite and made them dependent on it for their share of the accumulated surplus.

Ofofata (1978: 121) emphasizes the same point though in a different perspective when he states that before the emergence of what may be referred to as modern society, the choice of an urban centre or industrial site was based on experience only. If the notion of "modern society" is an attribute of the colonial urbanization then, there was truly one kind of urbanization before the invasion of colonial masters. For example, Ayeni (1978:191) declares that "urbanization in Nigeria dates back to medieval times" i.e. about 1100– 1500 (the Middle Ages). According to him:

By the middle of the 19th century for instance, there were two major areas of major and three other areas of minor urban development. The two major areas were in the south-west and northern parts of the country where urban developments among the Yoruba and the Hausa-Fulanis gave rise to the growth of systems of urban centres. The minor areas were the coastal city states of the Middle Delta, the Nupe urban system in the middle Niger and the Kanuri – Borno system in the North east.

Urban development in each of these areas was fostered by a well-developed political organization that ensured the effective functioning of cities as centres of trade, culture and administration. According to Ayeni (1978:192), urbanization in northern Nigeria has its origin in the “growth and decay” of the Sudanese empires (see Ayeni 1978: 192). He said using the great trans-Saharan routes to trade with North Africa, these empires developed a system of cities whose functions included trading as well as administration. The birth of ancient cities in Northern Nigeria e.g. the Original Seven Hausa States of Kano, Zazzau, Gobir, Katsina, Rano, Biram and Daurawa and their influence southwards into the states of Zamfara, Nupe, Gwari, Yauri and Kororofa are not remotely unconnected.

### **Non-Linguistic Problems of Urbanization**

The problems of urbanization are multifarious and range from social, economic, urban sprawl, industrial and environmental deterioration, traffic congestion to linguistic problems. These problems have been decried, criticized and recognised by economic-geographers, urban and regional planners and the governments of affected nations. Linguists too have taken time to discuss related problems in perspectives. One common feature of this criticism is that the problems are similar across nations of the world. In other words, the nature and types of the problems are the same world over. For instance, unemployment is a significant feature of urban areas especially in the developing nations. It is marked by an alarming rate of urban drift

immigrants from the rural areas who are mostly youths of unskilled or untrained labour force. They move into the cities without equal growth or expansion in socio-industrial development.

The reality of their unemployment makes it a societal problem because most of them usually end up becoming hooligans, i.e. “Areas-boys” especially in places like Lagos, Aba, and Onitsha in Nigeria. The net implication of their rate of unemployment is poverty, and lack of access to quality education for the children of parents in that social class. The spill over effects of it may include low social identity and conversational weakness in their use of Standard English, the variety that serves both as the medium of instruction in Nigerian schools as well as the official language of the nation.

From this premise, two new serious problems have emerged and must be addressed. First, Beinstein’s elaborated and restricted codes are sociolinguistic concepts that explain language use in relation to linguistic inequality and prejudice. His interest is on the role of language on socialization i.e. how a child acquires a specific cultural identity. According to this theory, a child growing up in a particular linguistic environment acquires the culture, and then proceeds to pass on the same values to the next generation. It was Bernstein’s belief that there is a direct and reciprocal relationship between a particular kind of social structure that produces its establishment and its maintenance, and the way people in that social structure use language. The second problem stems from the observation of Fries which reads “...anyone who cannot use the language habits in which the major affairs of the country are conducted, ...would have a serious handicap”. In Nigeria, English is still a minority language, though it is the official language. The implication is that the voice of the majority population has never been a part of any national decision.

Allied to the problem is housing i.e. scarcity of living accommodation. By extension, this may also lead to other problems such as overcrowding, undue pressure on existing infrastructural facilities e.g. water supplies, transportation sanitation, sewage and garbage disposal and/or exorbitant rental rates as experienced in New

York, London, Singapore and now in Abuja (Adeleke and Leong 1978:332). Overcrowding which characterizes the living quarters may pose some health hazards i.e. in times of epidemics in slums and squatter areas like Utako, Mararaba, Nyanya and Mabushi in Abuja (Nigeria).

### **The Sociolinguistic Situation in Nigerian Urban Centres**

In sociolinguistics discourse, linguists have identified three types of speech communities; namely, monolingual, bilingual and multilingual (Akindele and Adegbite, 1999:18; Onah, 2015:272; Holmes, 2013:38). Our attention in this work is the multilingual society. Nigeria is no doubt a multilingual nation housing over four hundred languages (Jowitt, 2012:9) and there is hardly any of the political zones in Nigeria that is not multilingual. The sad thing however is the lack of communicative space for some of these languages especially the minority ones to be fully engaged as regular media even in and outside their immediate limited speech communities.

Beyond the social, economic, industrial and environmental problems lays the linguistic problem of urbanization. Earlier, it was mentioned that urbanism is the movement of people from different socio-cultural backgrounds into highly concentrated small but developing towns. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and pluri-lingual nation (Jowitt, 2012:9; Matemilola, 1999: 97). The socio-political understanding in the country permits that any Nigerian can move from his or her home town to another state or town of his choice without necessarily consulting any agency. It is this liberty, unlike in the former apartheid South African policy that encourages the Ibo business man, Hausa and Yoruba traders to migrate from their states of origin (or geo-political regions) to towns or cities of their choice to do business. In the same way and spirit, people from the minority tribes also migrate to settle in any part of Nigeria where they think they can find satisfying livelihood (Holmes, 2013:19).

It is not an exaggeration to say that even the pre-independent Nigerians did engage in such movements. For instance, when we read



in Nigerian history that Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe was born in Zungeru (Niger State) and that Ikemba Odumegwu Ojukwu's father lived in Zaria several years before the civil war like many others, we cannot doubt but to accept the assertion that freedom of movement within the polity contributed to the growth of urban centres in Nigeria. Each of these men left the world of their first language probably without an idea of the language of their host communities. But as they began to interact as it is the case in every business contact in which the interactants do not share a common language, a form of a make-shift language eventually results. It is needless to say again that each of the parties in the new contact situations arrived with his or her language codes and habits. Nevertheless, "...each new language user has to "recreate" for himself or herself the language of the community" (Sydal and Jindal, 2013:51). Therefore, it is natural to expect that as the population of the emerging city continues to grow, even so the linguistic, economic and social outlook of the people grow complex. This makes the urban cities linguistically heterogeneous. Linguists refer to the presence of many languages in a geo-social such setting as multilingualism.

In multilingual cities, a language can be imposed e.g. the Greco-Roman Civilization earlier examined. Because of ethnolinguistic reasons, speakers of languages that are not used regularly may feel that they are being subjugated linguistically. Besides, for lack of whom they can speak with, the immigrants stand the risk of losing their language or the native-like rhetoric. One can say, in resume, that the existing geo-linguistic background of the total population makes for ease of cultural diffusion and language loss.

### **Methodological Issues**

Asika's (2010:42) "Randomization Principle" of Probability Sampling Methods were deployed to source responses from the people interviewed; they were literate, open-minded adults (natives and settlers) in each of the four States. A total of five respondents were drawn from Kaduna, Lagos, Onitsha (representing Anambra) and Port Harcourt (for Rivers) States to supply the first ten major languages in

the State. From their responses, the researcher revalidated and pruned the numbers to six each for Kaduna and Lagos; while Onitsha and Port Harcourt had unequal representation of seven and eight respectively due to certain sociolinguistic demographic factors. This empirical survey became the estimated distributional Chart of Languages of the urban centres studied.

Across the research zones, English, Nigerian Pidgin, the respective three majority Nigerian languages and the regionally major languages in Rivers State were considered as organic languages. These were followed by the minority, immigrants/minority settlers' languages. The analysis of the data was based and Nwana's (2008:218) Pie-Diagram (also known as Circle Graph) showing that the portion of the circle assigned to each category is proportional to its frequency. The following table showing an estimated distributional chart of languages in these Nigerian urban centres is illustrative of the above assertion.

### An Estimated Distributional Chart of Languages in Four Nigerian Urban Centres Studied

Table 1.

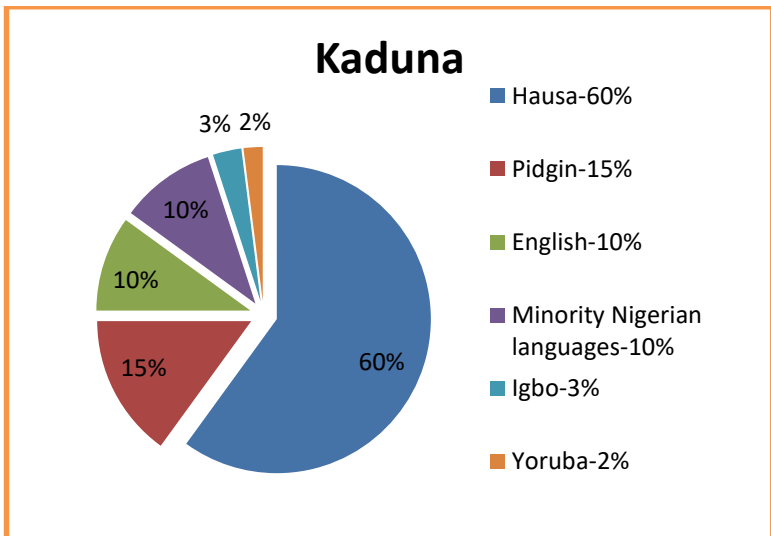


Table 2

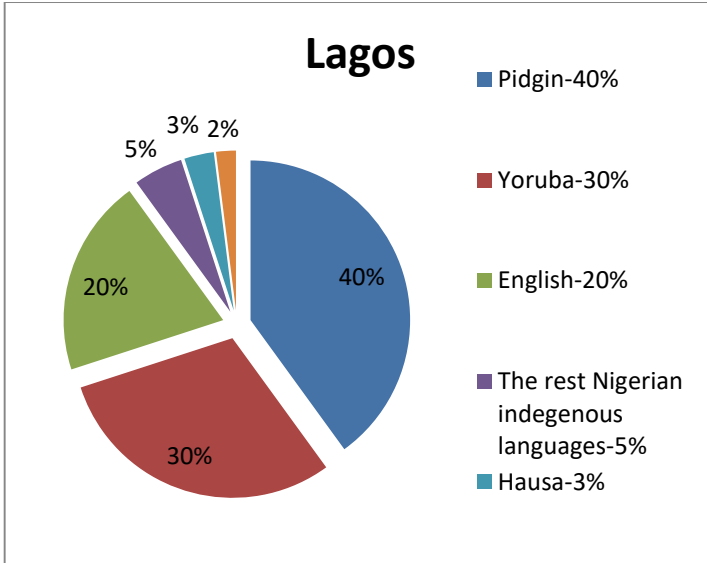


Table 3

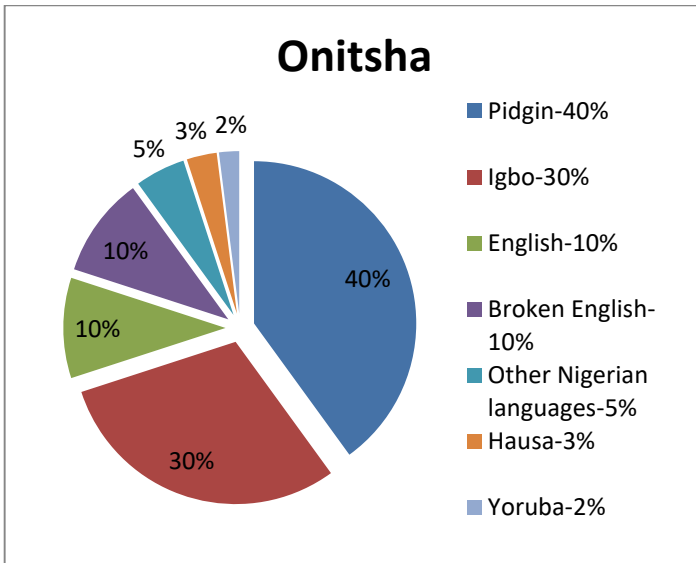
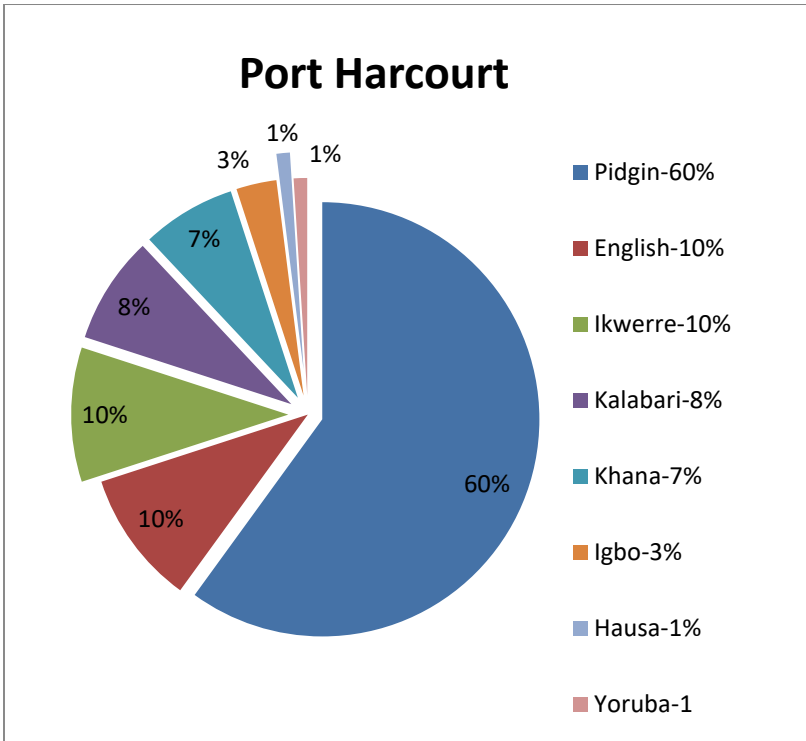


Table 4



**Source:** Onah 2022. An Estimated Distributional Chart of Languages in Four Nigerian Urban Centres

**Discussion of the Sociolinguistic Practice in Nigerian Urban Centres**

The sociolinguistic practice in Nigerian urban centres is not totally different from the communicative purposes of language users elsewhere in the world. For example, the contact situations everywhere include official circles, business fora, political spheres, religious circles, social/entertainment engagements, and commercial transactions. What is probably new is that the array of languages that are present in the community from which the urban dwellers have to choose is what differs from one speech community to another. Generally, the motivation for learning and speaking the language of wider

communication in urban centres the world over, is merely for survival and/or to secure a platform for participation in the verbal and social activities in the community. However, in each of these contact situations, the choice of language, the type of syntactic structures, lexical items and illocutionary drives that interactants employ are relatively fixed. For example, the nature of vocabulary items and sentence structures are largely determined by any of the following socio-pragmatic variables: (a) the context of discourse, (b) the relationship of the speaker to the listener, and lastly (c) the purpose of the communicative event.

Once the users of the target language begin to acquire the codes, they do not wait for mastery of the skills before they begin to function communicatively. It is this urgency that gives rise to what may be described as a pseudo semantic abuse e.g. a shop keeper or trader may say 'my customer' even when he or she is referring to a first timer patron. In the same way, a first timer buyer may address the shop keeper as 'my customer' as a social appeal for negotiating for a favourable discount; thereby stretching the semantic range of the vocabulary item.

The problem is not that individual members of the urban centres do not have a native language; it is rather a case of not finding someone with whom to speak as well as finding a natural communicative field to use the minority language in the urban centre(s) regularly. For example, the only fora where Nigerians from different ethnic nationalities sojourning in cities outside their homelands meet to interact as members of their respective communities are the tribal meetings. Such meetings are held once in a month. But can such irregular opportunities help to actively keep their communicative power without suffering attrition? For lack of practice, these speakers of such minority languages are not only separated partially from using their mother tongues, they are restricted in many ways to function in their new urban cities. The problem seems to be compounded by the understanding that at work, schools or market and other social contacts, the communicative relations are serviced through the language of wider communication.

There are instances where the indigenous majority languages also are regarded as minority tongues. For example, Hausa and Yoruba are both minority languages in Port Harcourt and Onitsha in the same way that Igbo and Yoruba are regarded in the Northern Nigeria. In Lagos, Igbo and Hausa are truly minority languages in the midst of Nigerian Pidgin and Yoruba.

### **Effects of Urbanization on Nigerian Speakers of Indigenous Minority Languages**

- **Linguistic alienation:** Many youths do not speak their mother tongues; neither do they want to learn such languages except for purposes of attending scholarship interviews or as a way of avoiding the embarrassment from their parents' relations; back way at home however they visit.
- Tribal names and/or marks which serve as generic clues to (or sociolinguistic evidence of) one's nativity are almost disappearing now. The net effect is that not only are most of these practices being lost but they are becoming much more detribalized especially the case of naming; may be for the sake of Christianity except among the Ibos, Yorubas, Igala, Idoma, Tiv, etc. who still give their children native (un-English) names. For example, among the southern Kaduna people, it is particularly possible to find the following combination of names as surnames and first name; Philip Simon, Jeremiah, Methuselah, Esther Donald, etc.
- As a result of the glide of stronger cultural values with a weaker one (diffusion), tales by moonlight that characterized the African rural life is subtly being substituted passively with watching of home videos among the urban children. It is needless to say that most of these movies are crafted mainly in the Nigerian pidgin or any of the majority languages that serves as the language of wider communication in the target market; another attempt which further estranges the rural child from his cultural roots as well as from his mother tongue.

- Urbanization has also caused grassroots linguistic practice to disappear fast. This is why the habit of using proverbs and phrasemics do no longer appear attractive among Nigerian urban youths. And to compound the degree of their estrangement, most of the contemporary literary materials are written in neo-colonial settings; thereby negating their chances of discovering the contextual illocutionary force of the indigenous communicative appeals they should have learned through the use of proverbs in relevant contexts.

## Conclusion

In Nigeria, urbanization has encouraged the existence of different varieties of the official language (English) and a number of the indigenous languages. For example, in most urban centres in Nigeria, Lagos, Abuja, Kaduna, etc., Nigerian Pidgin, Broken English, Educated West Africa English are all in use without a diglossic boundary (Boadi, Grieve and Nwankwo, 1968:45; Akindele and Adegbite, 1999:22). And one may justify the linguistic array as the result of the, though not clearly defined, existing social classes in the polity. A very serious impact of urbanization on language in a multilingual speech community is that the 'Target variety' is often inhibited by the existence of several conflicting varieties; yet there is a lack of desired reinforcement from the government. For example, English has been in use in Nigeria for the past 163 years now but proficiency in the desired standard is still insignificant (Onah, 2010:11). The situation may continue to worsen as long as the attitude of Nigerian national (political) leaders remains the same. And if a change is to be witnessed, then the state political organs are expected to take a decisive-policy action to realize the language policy or philosophy in the country. This will obviously help to solve the other attendant linguistic problems along with those created by urbanization.

There is no doubt that globalization will advance the frontiers of acceptability of Nigerian children elsewhere in the world, but the same group of children will doubly end up as foreigners to their native languages and to the socio-cultural relevance of their people. One cannot deny the fact that most of these urban children are trying to

learn or speak their mother tongues either as a second or third language; however, the theoretical knowledge of second language acquisition shows that such mechanical efforts have never produced a proficient native speaker of a target language. The second major problem is that multilingualism may negate the ease in the choice of a national language and lingua-franca. This is particularly possible as government at different levels operate the state affairs through petty compromise in a multilingual and multicultural situation. The Nigerian experience is indexical. For instance, should a nation that has over four hundred, indigenous languages adopt an exoglossic language as her national language? But that has been the Nigerian experience.

Finally, it is the submission of this research that the major factor that determines whether or not a language is a majority or minority tongue is largely the place and/or region where it is deployed for communicative service at a time.

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