

# The Concept of “Dominance Configuration” and the Nigerian Language Situation

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**THE CONCEPT OF "DOMINANCE  
CONFIGURATION" AND THE NIGERIAN  
LANGUAGE SITUATION**

The concept of language "dominance" is value-laden because it involves the language of at least two different peoples. In other words, two different languages (or dialects) must be in contact before we can talk of "dominance". When two such languages are in contact in one speaker — the bilingual — it is rare to have them setting out on the same footing, or maintaining that footing if they do set out equally. The reason for this imbalance is that, in the course of actual use of two languages by a bilingual, one of the two languages tries to dominate the other due to a number of factors.

In his *Languages in Contact* (Mouton, 1953)<sup>1</sup> Uriel Weinreich discusses the factors which determine the dominance of one of the two languages of a bilingual over the other. These factors include the bilingual's relative proficiency in each language ; his mode of use of the languages ; the order in which he learns the languages and the age at which each is acquired ; the utility of the languages, the speaker's emotional involvement in the languages ; the languages' contribution to social progress, and the literary and cultural values of the languages. All of these factors, according to Weinreich, constitute the domi-

nance configuration, and determine the relative status of each of the languages in the repertoire of a bilingual (or multilingual) speaker.

If a speaker has "greater proficiency" in one of the two languages, Weinreich considers that a reason for the dominance of that language over the other. And, according to him, for such proficiency to be considered a significant factor, it must be measured at the levels of the speaker's "understanding", expression and "inner speech", as well as measured for "a given moment in the bilingual's life, since the ratio can change in the course of time" (p. 75).

In Nigeria most bilinguals (i.e. those who have a good command of their mother-tongue and English) understand (i.e. decode) messages and express themselves better in their mother tongue. Moreover, they have a better "inner speech" facility (i.e. a larger store of passive vocabulary which they can always identify) in their mother-tongue than in the second language. The mother-tongue is dominant not just because it is learned first (a factor Weinreich considers important in cases of dominance), but because in the course of early exposure to the mother-tongue the speaker unconsciously acquires the "grammar" of the language, as well as its phonological nuances, so that he does make phonological, grammatical or lexical *mistakes* in that language during use.

In contrast, no matter how proficient he might be in the second language, the mere fact of its foreignness causes the Nigerian bilingual to inevitably make mistakes at least at the grammatical and phonological levels; for the phonological systems of the two languages, for instance, are different: one is stress-timed and the other is tonal.

Yet one finds that in many cases English, the language which is normally learnt *after* the mother-tongue, dominates the first language. We can trace the causes of this situation to the experience of colonialism. Nowhere is the problem of language dominance in the bilingual as real as in Nigeria with its history of colonialism, coupled with the reality of a multiplicity of languages and dialects. Part of the colonialist programme was the imposition of the language of the colonizer — in this case English — on the colonized. The colonized were indoctrinated into believing that their mother-tongue was no more than primitive babbling that had nothing to contribute to the advancement of man. As a result, school children were often punished if they were heard speaking the vernaculars in the school environment. And naturally, they developed a kind of hatred for their mother-tongue because of the embarrassment it caused them in social circles outside the home.

The result of this was that English got enthroned as the language not only of the literate culture but also the language of everyday interaction in elite social circles. Proficiency in English became an index of cultural refinement. As time went on, the bilingual who dogmatically stuck to his mother-tongue found himself alienated from the social life of those for whom English was a mark of culture. Even today flu-

ency in English is a prerequisite for membership in certain clubs or societies. Thus, a person who wants to be a member of such institutions necessarily has to attain a certain degree of proficiency in the use of English. J.A. Fishman has observed how "American immigrants needed English both as a *lingua franca* because they came from so many different speech communities and as a passport to social and economic advancement<sup>2</sup>". In America, as in Nigeria today, "English was the only language of value outside of the home"; those whose English was better progressed more rapidly, and there was "no domain in which the non-English ethnic language alone was required for 'membership'...<sup>3</sup>"

The American situation described by Fishman might not have its origins in colonialism as does the Nigerian situation, but in both cases the importance of English to social progress relates to what Weinreich has described as the "greater utility of [the] language, ... the extent to which it is actually used..." (Weinreich : 78). English, in contrast to the indigenous languages (or the immigrant ethnic languages in the American case), has more utility value. In Nigeria, English is the language of administration, legislation, instruction in schools, even of everyday social interaction among the educated and literate. This greater utility of English tends to make it dominant.

In some situations in Nigeria however, there is what one might call, for lack of a better term, dual dominance, a dominance that is an essentially contextual phenomenon. Here, one of the languages in the repertoire of a bilingual is dominant in one context while the other is in another. For instance English dominates (in terms of utility, especially when the interlocutors speak a variety of languages) whenever official, legal, educational or administrative matters are being discussed. However when a bilingual leaves the office or school or any other environment where English is the accepted medium of communication and goes back to his village, for instance, where his interlocutors are proficient in only the mother-tongue, code-switching naturally takes place to ensure understanding. For that bilingual, English is permanently dominant in the official context whereas his mother-tongue dominates in the village context. We can thus say that for the educated Nigerian who is bilingual in his mother-tongue and English there are two permanent types of environment, in which one of his two languages has more utility value.

Another reason for the dominance of a given language is its literary and cultural value. Writing in a language makes it available at a given point in time; writing also makes a language a permanent facet of culture. The literary style of a culture expressed through its language is often considered a distillation of the best minds of that culture. Hence people often try to approximate the style of writing prevalent at a certain time. Whichever language exhibits such accepted, codified stylistic traits is likely to dominate. A language that has an orthography

more easily transports the cultural values of its speakers to another milieu (and gains acceptability, especially if transported to a country with a recent colonial history) than a language that has no orthography (as was the case with many Nigerian languages until recently). When the oral aspects of one of the languages of a bilingual gets visual graphological reinforcement such a language will certainly become dominant. I know many Igbo speakers who can neither read nor write Igbo; in such cases, their English exercises a necessary dominance over Igbo, for the former serves as the medium of written communication.

There are situations however where the dominance of one language over another is traceable to the emotional attachment of a speaker to that language. Here, two patterns are identifiable in Nigeria. The first is the unusual dominance of the indigenous first language or mother-tongue over English. The second is the dominance of one Nigerian language, over another in a bilingual or multilingual proficient in more than one Nigerian language.

There is the belief (borne out by observation) that the Yorubas and Hausas are more emotionally attached to their mother-tongues than are most Igbos for instance. Even in an official (administrative) or educational context, two Yorubas equally competent in English and Yoruba are more likely to be caught speaking Yoruba to one another (as would be the case with two Hausas) than would two Igbos. A lot of factors are responsible for this, of course, but most prominent in the case of the Yoruba and Hausa bilingual would be a certain emotional attachment to the indigenous language, manifested as pride in the linguistic culture. This pride in the native language seems related to the effort to reject linguistic colonialism. On the other hand, the Igbo, it is believed, prefer to speak English rather than Igbo to each other because they attach a higher social value to English than to Igbo. While this attitude is changing, it is happening rather slowly.

Yoruba and Hausa might be considered good examples of what Gilbert Ansre describes as "resistant" languages, that is those "in which the influence of foreign languages is minimised because of a purist view of the language", whereas Igbo would be an example of an "accommodating" language, "one whose native speakers readily accept foreign elements into their language" because of the greater acceptability of the foreign language to such speakers. (Of course certain other factors are involved in making a language "resistant" or "accommodating", but these are not our concern here.)

The other case in which emotional attachment to a language is manifested results in the dominance of one Nigerian language over another in a bilingual or multi-lingual who is proficient in more than one Nigerian language. The history of Nigeria and its multiple ethnic groups reveals that certain groups who, for some political reason, are labelled or have labelled themselves "minorities" express revul-

sion or hostility towards the speakers of the "major" languages, and prefer speaking their own languages whenever possible. This linguistic hostility is explicable in terms of the fear of political domination/extinction. Inglehart and Woodward have observed that the "likelihood that linguistic division will lead to political conflict is particularly great when the language cleavages are linked with the presence of a dominant group which blocks the social mobility of the members of a subordinate group ... on the basis of language factors<sup>5</sup>". Nowhere in Africa is this pattern of socio-political hostility and dominance of one language over another resulting from emotional attachment to the language as demonstrable as in Nigeria. It is one of the major obstacles to the emergence of a *lingua franca* from among the major languages in Nigeria.

One positive aspect of this emotional attachment to language in Nigeria is that it has led to encouragement being given to the development and study of the "minor" languages. There was a time when Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba were the only Nigerian languages used for news broadcasts. Later, such languages as Kanuri, Ffulde, Izon, Edo, Efik, etc. came to be included.

In multilingual states such as the Rivers State, the federal-owned NTA Port Harcourt now broadcasts news in four local languages — Ikwerre, Kalabari, Khana and Kolokuma, while the state-owned Radio Rivers has programmes not only in the above languages, but also in Ekpeye, Igbani, Okrika, Eleme and Ndoni, some of which are merely dialects of the major languages. In time, as such languages develop and become socially accepted as media of instruction and interpersonal communication, they are likely to gain local dominance.

However conflicts among the indigenous languages give English the upper hand. In any case, since English is the primary language of modern technology and science, as well as international communication, it has global importance, which the Nigerian languages lack. It will therefore continue to be relied upon in Nigeria because of its all-encompassing dominance configuration.

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#### Notes and References

1. All page references are to the 1953 reprint.
2. J.A. Fishman (1972) : "The Sociology of Language", in Pier Paolu Gigholi (Ed.), *Language and Social Context*, Penguin, p. 52.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Gilbert Ansre (1971) : "The Influence of English on West African Languages", in John Spencer (Ed.), *The English Language in West Africa*, Longman, p. 148.
5. R.F. Inglehart and M. Woodward (1972) : "Language Conflicts and Political Community",

in Pier P. Giglioli, *Language and Social Context*,  
Hammondsworth, Penguin, p. 360.