

Mandarin in Lagos schools: Emerging online perspectives

Abstract:

In 2013, the Lagos State government, under Governor Babatunde Fashola, introduced the teaching and learning of Mandarin in five state-owned secondary schools as part of efforts to identify with China, which is fast becoming a world power of note. Using the research instrument of netnography, data harvested reveal various perspectives of Lagosians about the socio-cultural implications of this action on the indigenous languages of Nigeria and the people as a whole. While some netizens applaud the governor's initiative towards raising the economic status of youths in Lagos through alliance with China and her language, critics express fears of cultural and linguistic conflict as well as language loss. The paper concludes that much as the motivation for introducing Mandarin stemmed from the prospects of economic benefits, coming to full terms with the implementation of the policy calls for further ethnographic investigation.

Key Words: Mandarin, Lagos State, Netnography, Linguistic conflict, Economic empowerment

Introduction

Lagos State government under Governor Babatunde Fashola, in November 2012, made the move to begin the pilot teaching and learning of Chinese (Mandarin) in five public schools in the state that is acknowledged as Nigeria's commercial capital, besides being its former political capital. The commissioner of education then, Mrs Olayinka Oladunjoye, announced the governor's intentions after a meeting with the delegation from Chinese Confucius Institute, University of Lagos. The programme started in 2013 in Bolade Junior Grammar

School, Oshodi and Ikeja Junior Grammar School. Others are Immaculate Heart Comprehensive Junior High School, Maryland; Mende Junior High School, Maryland and New Era Junior High School, Surulere. The project will be facilitated by Chinese Confucius Institute charged with the responsibility of handling all the logistics for the take-off of the programme. Stambach and Kwayu (2017: 411) reveal that there is an “expanding network of Confucius Institutes (CI) active in teaching the Hanyu (Mandarin) Chinese language in hundreds of countries around the world, through a political lens”. They argue that the feelings of the people, who are at the centre of the China-Africa cultural relationship, should be given special attention in the new wave of African countries embracing Chinese studies even up to the tertiary level of education.

Still on Chinese Confucius Institutes (CIs), Nogayeva (2015: 583) intimates that “China is using these schools and their population as important tools in expanding its area of influence in regional and international platforms”. Central to this China’s capacity to influence various regions and countries of the world through schools is the introduction and teaching of Mandarin at the various CIs.

Since China has emerged a world power of repute, the establishment of CIs in African countries will not only consolidate China’s political influence, it may also expand her socio-cultural presence. In furtherance to this, Falk (2015: 245) sees CIs as “an important tool in China’s public diplomacy employed by government to communicate specific strategic narratives about China to foreign publics, and in so doing increase China’s soft power”. This claim is also supported by Ying (2016) while revealing that there are 249 CIs around the world. However, Yuan et al (2016: 334) argue that these institutes “have not had a positive impact on China’s global interests”. Pratik Jakhar (BBC News, September 7, 2019) gives us a

more accurate figure of 548 CIs and 1193 Confucius classrooms in primary and secondary schools around the world as at the end of 2018. According to him, China claims that CI is “a bridge reinforcing friendship between it and the world” but critics feel that “it is a way of Beijing to spread propaganda under the guise of teaching”. This may explain why some colleges around the globe are shutting down their CIs since law makers see them as avenues for Chinese government propaganda (BBC News, September 7, 2019).

On his part, Governor Fashola reasoned that the globally-expanding Chinese economy was the reason for the introduction of Mandarin in Lagos schools. The subject, though not compulsory, is desirable for citizens of Lagos State who may wish to further their studies in China and carry out research in various fields of human endeavour, considering that China has become a success story in global economy. In his words, “the decision does not compel any child who does not want to. Let us start from there, but perhaps I think it is important and this is my view of the matter” (Press Briefing, 19th November, 2012). Governor Fashola strengthened his advocacy for the introduction of Mandarin to Lagos schools by reckoning that “the Chinese are becoming our largest trading partners”. On its face value, the official explanation by the Governor underscores proactive attitude on the part of the state. It additionally speaks to the iteration of the state as the "Centre of Excellence" and trailblazer that other Nigerian states emulate in their aspirations and realization of development.

Some netizens see the initiative as a proactive and diplomatic one while others express fear that it might just be the onset of linguistic conflict as well as Chinese cultural imperialism. Many people have also expressed anxiety about the fate of Nigerian indigenous languages in the face of threats from more prestigious second and third foreign languages. The situation dramatizes what Aikio (1991: 93) refers to as the "pressures of change and reification" that

often precipitate the compromise of the "linguistic, political, social, economic, and territorial rights" of peoples' indigenous languages.

Coming to terms with the immediate responses of Lagosians and Nigerians in general, this study adopts netnography. It seeks to scrutinize the nuances and dynamics of the immediate reactions of people to the linguistic development as captured in online discussions. This for me, is the first step in a series of studies on the advent of Mandarin in Nigerian schools. While serving as a preliminary commentary, it is the intention of this researcher to follow up on the experience of the Mandarin in the selected Lagos schools in the hope that it will set the tone for subsequent ethnography, considering that Mandarin has now been taught for over half a decade in the schools.

Recognition of Chinese as a world power

China has fast emerged as a world power since the turn of the 21st century. The substance of the emergence is evident in the unprecedented spread of Chinese economic interest around the world. The African dimension to the dispersal is an indication that the continent is as important in the determination of the overall Chinese rise as a world power. According to Stambach and Kwayu (2017), there has been a growing Chinese interest in the African sub-region, which has now translated into the introduction of Mandarin in secondary schools through the agency of CIs. Much of the mandate of the CIs find schools in the host countries as ready platforms for the implementation of Chinese language and culture.

While Botman (2013) reveals that China has established 29 CIs for the teaching of Mandarin and Chinese culture in 22 African countries, Chinese Language Council (Hanban) claims that “there are 54 Confucius Institutes in Africa, the same number as there are countries in the

continent”. With the establishment of one such school in the University of Lagos, the pace is set for Chinese cultural presence in the city, and by extension other parts of Nigeria. Botman describes the recent aids being granted African States by China as “strongly coloured by the experience and legacy of Western colonialism”. This then leaves much room for questions about the socio-political necessity for establishing the CIs. Struggle for space and supremacy has always been characteristic of world powers and with the emerging profile of China as the next world power, her interest in any African country should elicit questions pertaining to the genuineness of her actions, even if Nogayeva (2015: 584) refers to China’s kind gestures to Africa as "unconditional financial assistance” . If China has been noted for using ‘soft power’ (Nye 1990; Botman 2013; Nogayeva 2015) in other countries of the world, African countries, and by implication Nigeria, cannot be said to be an exception. This much is evident in the official reception Mandarin is receiving in selected Lagos State schools at the moment upon the directive from the state government to institute the teaching of the language. The immediate online reactions thus deserve to be further engaged.

The presence of China is felt in the field of science and technology, trade relations as well as in other areas of human endeavours in African States (Moyo 2016). Friedrichs (2019: 1) reveals that China enjoys much popularity between the business and political elite and the masses both in Africa and the Middle East due to popular beliefs that ‘Beijing offers resources ‘with no strings attached’. Mr Babatunde Fashola, who was then governor of Lagos State explained, in his broadcast on November 19, 2012, that his decision to introduce Mandarin in public schools in Lagos was to align with China who is fast emerging as a robust economy. According to Fashola,

Now about Chinese language, I think we must continue to think about what our world would be like in the next 20 to 30 years and anybody who is being honest with himself would see clearly that from Britain to the United States, the Chinese are becoming our largest trading partners

. (<http://tribune.com.ng/index.php/lead-stories/51066-why-we-introduced-chinese-language-in-lagos-schools-fashola-marks-2000-days-in-office>)

Nigeria has been collaborating with China in trade and it is anticipated that in the next 20 to 30 years, China would be Nigeria's largest trading partner. For ease of communication during transactions, it is expedient that Lagosians, in particular, learn Mandarin (Chinese). Ovadia (2013) however describes China's activities in African countries as "accumulation by dispossession". Such critical view about the Chinese economic relations with Africa has implications for other sectors in the cultural and the linguistic. This is in view of the fact that economic dispossession has the tendency to go simultaneously with other forms of dispossession. Invariably, teaching of Mandarin may further expand Chinese cultural influence in Lagos. Trade relationship already exists between Nigeria and China, but the official introduction of the language in public schools may entrench Chinese socio-cultural presence in the state and by implication the country, if we consider the status of Lagos as a trailblazer. Trade relationships have often been avenues for language contact, which may bring about one party learning the language of the other (Holmes 1992). Pidgins and creoles are known to have arisen through such contacts resulting from trading activities. The much is the case with Swahili in East and Central Africa (Coleman 1971) as is true of pidgin in Nigeria (Brosnahan 1958).

Data harvested from the internet reveal that the move by the former governor of Lagos State was a welcome idea and should be supported. As a contributor to the <http://tribune.com.ng/index.php/lead-stories/51066- platform> remarked:

As for Chinese language; the rate at which China is moving, it's like the world is pointing to her. Kudos to Fashola for his foresight.

The data above still alludes to China as part of the world powers and the status that Mandarin may soon attain amongst the languages of the world. If other nations in the West are beginning to form close alliances with China, then the initiative to include Chinese as a subject of study in Lagos schools might be a wise decision especially for students who wish to pursue further studies in China. Generally innovations such as learning a new language of power will be more appealing to young people because of the prospects on leverage such acquisition has for career and economic development. It is the more so in the Nigerian context where youths feature prominently in the current unemployment saga that has faced Nigeria in the last thirty years. For instance, youth unemployment rate was said to have increased to 38 percent in the last quarter of 2018 (<https://tradingeconomics.com>). This accounts for why they are at the center of the quest for better living conditions, employment opportunities and access to funded studies in China. Adults however, may not be as receptive to the initiative, given that they would want to question the reason for the move and its long term effect on Lagosians, and by extension Nigerians.

Kubota (2016: 467) agrees that “Many individuals are compelled to learn an additional language to seek global career opportunities and to develop a competitive edge in

increasingly uncertain employment conditions under neoliberalism. However, linguistic competence alone may not provide the skills and dispositions that are essential for working with global partners”. Although linguistic competence alone may not enhance employment opportunities, in the case of Lagos-China relations, knowledge of Mandarin is reckoned by the governor as constituting an important index in socio-economic ties between both parties.

Methodology

Described as "an approach to studying online communities and cultures to arrive at an ethnographic understanding (Kulavuz-Onal and Va'squez 2013: 224), netnography is derived from internet and ethnography. It is an online tool or method of data collection about people's reactions and opinions with the advantage of the researcher and the commentators not being physically present. Thus establishes a condition of double anonymity that facilitates unhindered expression of feelings by respondents as they are saved the physical observation that is typical of ethnography, which may affect their natural responses. This study used harvested data from the internet to examine the reaction of Lagosians in relation to the introduction of Mandarin in some schools in Lagos. The online interaction was harnessed from OTEDO.COM (<https://ihuanedo.ning.com/group/edonaze/page/lagos-to-introduce-chinese-language-in-public-schools>), which is a platform where a discussion loop is generated in response to a media report on the proposed introduction of Mandarin to selected schools in Lagos State in 2012.

The second platform for the netnographic research is Nairaland Forum available at <https://www.nairaland.com/1107072/why-introduced-chinese-language-lagos>. The two sites were selected for this study because of their popular reception among netizens. Another

reason for their selection was informed by the volume of following and their reputation for being among foremost sites dedicated to the discussion of serious socio-political issues of national and international interest. Some of the participants on OTEDO.COM are notable and influential public figures and opinion leaders who are involved directly or indirectly in the affairs of running Lagos State. The conversation, which lasted for over two months, from 10th September to 19th November, 2012, extended contributions on the topic.

More specifically, Nairaland is a social networking site that thrives on user-generated contents and has been adjudged to be popular in facilitating discussions on burning issues of political, social and economic importance, which are usually of national and international concerns. As of 11th March, 2020, the statistics provided on the Nairaland indicated that it had 2,432,238 members and had registered up to 5,465,527 for conversation. The statistics foreground the popularity of the site in matters of engagement with burning issues in Nigeria. Although OTEDO.COM is a topic blog focused on Edo/Benin politics, huge presence of this ethnic nationality in Lagos State has also meant that issues and happenings in the state are also of concern to followers of the blog. Above all, the designation of Lagos as the most populous state in Nigeria has always meant that issues of concern in the state are reflected upon by its inhabitants, regardless of their origins.

On both online platforms, and as will be discussed shortly, the online sociality underscores the assertion that such fora challenge researchers to "examine and account for the performative capacities of actors and their practices of enactment" (Lugosi and Quinton 2018: 287). More importantly, the choice of netnography as first research response to the linguistic development is informed by the capacity of the method to capture the immediate reactions that anticipated implementation of the policy. This way, it is possible to thereafter review the

reactions against the actualities of implementation where ethnography of the implementation can be measured against the anticipations of netnography.

Some of the reactions on the net have questioned the very essence of the idea itself, anticipating the onset of Chinese linguistic imperialism while others examined its workability as well as implications for cultural and linguistic conflict. Data from these reactions therefore form the basis on which this study is hinged. Of the 38 messages/contributions on Nairaland on the topic, 13 were selected for analysis, while three were excerpted from OTEDO.COM to complement the conversations, seeing that the debates were along similar lines.

Data Analysis: Anticipating the onset of Chinese linguistic/cultural imperialism

Netizens who gave their opinions on the online platforms expressed fears that the introduction of Mandarin in public schools in Lagos might be a move towards Chinese linguistic and cultural imperialism. Their anxiety is premised on the evidence of Chinese transnational economic domination with pronounced manifestation in Nigeria, which has paved the way for the dispersal of Chinese cultural influence. Invariably, students who are absorbed in the Mandarin programme may well abandon their mother tongue for Mandarin in the bid to identify with the rising profile of China as dominant world economic power. According to Botman (2013: 8), “if China’s efforts to extend its economic influence in Africa pay off, it might well also extend the reach of Chinese language and culture on the continent”. To that extent, the reception Mandarin has received in the Lagos schools

exemplifies the onset of Chinese cultural and linguistic imperialism in complementation of the economic influence it already enjoys on the continent. As if aware of the speculation with the linguistic and cultural implications of the development, a participant responded thus:

Please folks, we as Nigerians do not need Chinese language, all we need from the Chinese is their technology. Why is it that we are not interested in our things (OTEDO.COM)

As far as this contributor is concerned, Nigerians do not necessarily have to learn Mandarin in order to benefit from the technological developments for which China is taking the lead in the global equation. However, linguistic power has often been associated with political and technological advancement. It was after delegates from Chinese Confucius Institute, University of Lagos paid a visit to Governor Fashola that he declared his intention to include Mandarin in the curriculum of public schools in the state (www.amheritageuniv.net). The respondent asks Lagosians to tap into China's technological advancement and discard Mandarin. This might prove difficult if not impossible, for to accept a people is to accept their language.

English is the language of the world today due to England's rise as the world's dominant technological and economic power in the eighteenth century. For more than a century, it remained the foremost global power, with France being its closest rival on the imperial stage. The economic and political influence associated with world powers endears them to underdeveloped and developing countries, who, in a bid to tap from the wealth of such powers, inadvertently surrender themselves to some form of imperialism. In many countries

of the world that were colonized by Britain, English still functions as the language of education, government, the media and all formal interactions. In such countries, the indigenous languages of the people have given way to English, even in the post-colonial era (Posel and Zeller 2016). English plays such a prominent role in the shift of the world's languages that some linguists have termed it a "killer language" (Mufwene 2014). With the rising economic power of China in the global equation, Mandarin may soon assume the role of the world's language.

In the case at hand, English has remained the official language of Nigeria while the country's estimated 450 indigenous languages (14th edition of *Ethnologue*) have been relegated to the background. Although Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo--three languages that have considerable number of speakers--have attained national language level, they cannot compare with the status of English in Nigeria. With the socio-economic privileges anticipated in learning Mandarin, in the near future, not only would the students, develop some loyalty to it, other Nigerians may well begin to toe the same line. The logic of the projection is based on the facts of Chinese economic influence in Nigeria and the potential gains for Nigerians especially the youth, considering that "the distribution of linguistic capital is related in specific ways to the distribution of other forms of capital (economic capital, cultural capital, etc.)" (Bourdieu and Thompson in Zorčič (2019)). It is a projection of what may happen should some knowledge of Mandarin be seen as a prerequisite for economic advancement. Such development stands to precipitate the ongoing marginalization of Nigerian indigenous languages that have already been generally consigned to the background because of the various forms of capital associated with English and French.

In another reaction, a commentator advised Nigerians to learn from the past and even the present, as these would assist in taking decisions that would not jeopardize the future of generations yet unborn:

The only race on earth who never learns any useful lessons from the past and present are Africans, Nigerians in particular. Worst still, the only people who never develop their own talents and creativity are Nigerians and Africans. (OTEDO.COM)

The past being alluded to by the respondent above is not unconnected with British imperialism in some African states and Nigeria in particular. Generally, British attainment of global imperialism is measured by the spread and reception of English across the world. The present may be the current status and power of English over and above our indigenous languages that has made many young Nigerians neglect their heritage languages. The introduction of Mandarin in government-owned high schools is so far only an initiative of the Lagos State government. However, Lagos, as the economic nerve centre of Nigeria, is noted for setting the pace in matters that border on economic empowerment. It is also important to note that the reaction by the respondent above underscores the level of his awareness by the very sense in which he expresses anxiety over the possibility of Chinese Mandarin attaining global reception comparable to English. As many African linguistic scholars have argued, the neglect of African indigenous languages stand to hinder the evolution of true African development (Adegbite 2004; Alexander 2008). The potential of the spread of Mandarin to further push Nigerian languages to the background is accentuated in the reckoning that “although the English language is still the major global language, the Mandarin Chinese language is challenging it and hoping to replace it in the future” (Odinye 2015: 1). In other

words, while still trying to cope with English, Mandarin may soon become another foreign language that Nigerians may be inclined to acquire when most of the indigenous languages are not utilized to mediate development. The tendency to compare English and Mandarin in studies is already a pointer that the latter holds the potential of assuming global reception (Wu et al. 2019).

The anticipation of the future with respect to the introduction of Mandarin to schools in Lagos State also comes with a dimension of admiration. It manifests in form of commendation and anticipates how it is likely to spread to other states of the Nigerian federation. This is because in the estimation of this respondent, there is something about it that speaks to raising educational standards:

By introducing optional Chinese language lessons in Lagos State schools, Governor Fashola has raised the bar of educational standards yet again, in a master-stroke of prudent foresight that will in due course be emulated by governors of many other states in the federation.
(Nairaland)

Whatever begins in Lagos often spreads all over Nigeria, especially as people from almost every part of Nigeria flock to Lagos in their numbers daily in search of greener pastures (Uyieh 2018). Implicated in the response is that because initiatives such as this hold the potential of replication in other Nigerian states, the “optional” dimension to the learning of Chinese would soon gain traction in other states. Affirming such position is not unconnected

with the Governor Fashola observation that acquiring Mandarin stands to boost economic relations between Lagos State and Chinese investors. A replication of such programme would just be in order in other states, since they would also covet improvement in their economic relations with China.

However, another netizen offers the following caution: “Rather than resort to China for anticipated aids and economic empowerment, Nigeria should seek ways of pursuing science and technology for sustainable development. That way, she will not find herself in a vulnerable position that may necessitate compromises”.

Other comments appear to be in support of Governor Fashola’s initiative. These respondents do not seem to be bothered by Chinese cultural imperialism, but are motivated by the possibility of better conditions of living. In view of the privileges being anticipated by gaining mastery in Mandarin, these respondents are of the opinion that the initiative is a step in the right direction:

My view on this matter is based on economics and Africans have no economic power neither can we manufacture anything. Fashola’s government is not stupid. Go to Lagos and see what the Chinese are doing on the railways. Give it another ten years, this policy you are rubbishing will yield benefits to a lot of people. (OTEDO.COM)

Such response is in resonance with the various debates across Africa since the turn of the 21st century regarding the imperative of relating with China for economic development

(Bräutigam 1998; du Toit 2015). A number of such debates have also touched on the implication of acquiring Mandarin as a natural process in the development of the relations, seeing that China appears to be the stronger partners in the evolving equation (Dollie 2011; Wang 2013; Nel 2016). The commentator prioritizes the socio-economic benefits from being proficient in Mandarin. Since the Chinese government is already carrying out developmental projects in Lagos, it is not surprising that the governor is entrenching language policies that are favourable to China in the education sector.

Campbell (2008: 1) observes that “In the first decade of the 21st century China has been able to enter political, military and commercial deals with countries of the ASEAN community, the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, and the countries and observers in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)”. In these countries, the teaching and learning of Mandarin has been entrenched through the establishment of CIs. If other nations of the world are beginning to learn Mandarin in recognition of the emerging powers of China, then Governor Fashola’s initiative may just be on the trail of current global trends.

China has established close ties with African countries as noted by Campbell (2008: 1). According to him, “In November 2006 China sealed this circle with a strategic partnership with Africa at a major feast of leaders celebrating the friendship and co-operation between the two. The emergence of China as a force in Africa complicated the tussle between the EU and the USA over ‘who controls Africa’”. Africa is now in the centre of another tussle by past and present world powers over her politico-economic landscape. Central to her vulnerability is the raging poverty and hunger associated with many African countries for which any form of alleviation is welcomed (NguyenHuu and Schwiebert 2019). Yet, it is necessary that the mode of reception is moderated to reflect the primacy of the African

developmental essence, considering that prospects of African development suggested by foreign powers have always held an attraction for the continent (Campbell 2008). Zeleza (2014) further explains that China's interest in Africa is anchored on the fact that African countries have become "a lucrative export market for Chinese manufactured goods". Africa currently is one of China's biggest trade partners, which is why an understanding of Mandarin is expedient.

As Stambach and Kwayu (2017: 414) argue, "this development represents new forms of exploitation". Such assertion references the antecedent of Western imperial languages in the domination of the world because of the economic and political prominence of such nations. They support their argument by quoting Dr Patrick Lumumba, a former director of the Kenya Anti-Corruption Commission and a professor of law at the University of Nairobi as admonishing a Tanzanian audience of university students and professors as saying: "Do not look east or west, look forward. Foreign investors are grabbing our land, and our countries are being exploited". This caution, though given in 2014 and to Tanzanians, is as pertinent to other countries in Africa as it is to Nigeria today.

Cultural and Linguistic Implications

Online reactions to Governor Fashola's move to introduce the teaching of Mandarin in some Government-owned secondary schools betray worries about the fate of Nigeria's indigenous languages. Respondents decry the attention government is giving to foreign languages thereby, promoting them over and above the languages of the country. The presence of the English language in Nigeria continues to threaten the survival of many indigenous languages, some of which are already endangered. The situation resonates with the overarching assumption about the multilingual diversity of Africa for which the colonial languages

continue to persist in the continent (Kamwangamalu 2016). School children who are involved in the training will have to, apart from English and the mother tongue, learn Mandarin as well as French, which has been declared as the second official language of Nigeria. French is compulsorily taught from elementary to tertiary institutions although it does not have the same reach as English (See Nigeria's National Policy on Education 2014). Netizens speak to these issues around language and culture in Africa.

As one commentator puts it:

They want to erode our language completely because even now that the language is being taught, most pupils are still finding it difficult to understand the language that is meant to be their L1. ([Nairaland](#))

The indigenous language the commentator refers to in the context of the discussion is Yoruba. The grand paradox subsisting in the revelation is that even when Yoruba is taught to pupils who are supposed to be native speakers in Lagos, they find it difficult to understand it. This is because increasingly Yoruba youth are shifting from the language to English (Raheem 2013), as intergenerational transfer is reducing. Drawing from the socio-economic benefits being envisaged, the shift from Yoruba may be doubled as the inclination towards Mandarin grows.

In another reaction, the same fear of the possible loss and threat to Nigerian languages, especially Yoruba, which is the dominant language in Lagos, is expressed:

When most students can hardly use English fluently. Fashola should apply maturity in whatever he chooses to do with our language here. There is no place like home, our language and culture define our home to a large extent. (Nairaland)

The place of language and culture in defining an individual's identity cannot be over-emphasized. The commentator above speaks to another dimension to the language situation in Lagos and Nigeria generally. A certain category of students is known to perform abysmally in English, especially those in the rural areas. The reason often adduced for such failure is the refusal of the policy makers to sanction the use of indigenous languages as languages of instruction in schools. For such pupils, the argument is that if they had been taught in indigenous languages, they would not have been adjudged poor or inadequate intellectually. This linguistic debate on the possible replacement of English with Nigerian languages was led by Fafunwa (1989) and has continued to remain a reference point where issues around crisis with English in the context of learning in Nigeria is concerned. With such situation already on ground for some Nigerians, it would be an additional burden for students who are struggling with mastering English to be encumbered with acquiring Mandarin.

Governor Fashola is advised to, while considering the economic interests of Lagosians, also weigh both the linguistic and the cultural implications of his language policies. Yet, it is important to state further that the imperative of globalisation has informed the learning of various local languages in other climes. The knowledge that several African languages,

including Yoruba, are being taught at China's Beijing Foreign Studies University, is a pointer to this fact.

In counter reactions to the fear of language loss, some online respondents do not believe that the introduction of Mandarin in Lagos schools might pose a threat to Nigerian indigenous languages. They see no reason why a child should lose its first language just because of the introduction of another foreign language at school if it has been well grounded in the language at home. As if anticipating such reaction, Governor Fashola himself remarked thus:

Our mother tongue, Yoruba language, is not the responsibility that we should pass to the teachers. It is the responsibility of the parents to teach their children the Yoruba language at home. (Nairaland)

Linguists have always affirmed that intergenerational transmission is the best way to keep a language alive and that the home is the first place for a child to learn his mother tongue (Fishman 1991; Clyne 2003; Smith-Christmas 2014). In view of this, by the time a child attains high school age, he should have attained such mastery of the language that cannot be easily threatened by the introduction of a foreign language as subject at school. The response below corroborates the fact that the responsibility of teaching children their heritage language lies with the home and not the school:

Though Yoruba language is still being taught in schools, it would not be the responsibility of teachers to teach pupils and students their mother tongue. (Nairaland)

The best that can happen in high schools is for children to be taught their mother tongue as a subject of study. Even when the Nigerian National Policy on Education (1977) stipulates that every child be taught in his mother tongue in the first three years of elementary education, this is premised on the assumption that the child has already acquired the language at before school age. Parents should therefore encourage their wards to speak their heritage language with pride, while identifying with their people and culture (Senayon 2016). That way, no matter the number of prestigious languages they face in life, the mother tongue would still retain its place as first language (L1).

Another commentator however, does not agree with the task of teaching children indigenous languages being left in the hands of parents alone. He asserts that the school still has a crucial role to play:

Fashola is wrong by saying learning native language starts and ends with parents. How about writing, reading and promoting it as a medium of instruction in our schools? As a medical doctor, I find it difficult communicating diagnosis to my patients with cancer of the prostate, marrow, pancreas and enlarged spleen because there are no native words for these organs. (Nairaland)

One other commentator, who disagrees with Fashola, also has this to say:

I disagree with Fashola on this one. English is still taught in the UK, even though it is the primary language. It is not only about speaking Yoruba, but also writing Yoruba. Not all parents can teach their children to write well. Besides, spoken language may have been corrupted by slangs.

(Nairaland)

Standardizing the orthographies of indigenous languages in the country remains a linguistic task that has to be undertaken by the Nigerian government. That way, the languages can then become media of instruction in communities where they are spoken. Learning materials can then also be produced in the languages. The three major languages (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) that used to be compulsory subjects were recently made optional. The governor however, claims that Mandarin is not compulsory but desirable just like other languages. It is expected therefore that its introduction should not constitute any threat to indigenous languages.

The psycholinguistic dimension

Some of the online comments border on the psychological consequence of exposing young persons to several languages at the same time. Such commentators express fears for brain damage, speech confusion and mental disorders. Their fears are expressed in these words: “Fashola, just create a language school for whoever is interested and don’t muddle the

student's brain". In this instance, the addition of Mandarin to the school curriculum complicates the formal linguistic load young learners have to cope with. In a similar vein, another commentator remarked that "People have not finished learning English yet you want to add Chinese into the mix". For another participant in the online discussion, his object obtains from the apparent unfamiliarity of the Chinese orthography, which he compares with "the scribbles of a month old baby". Such insights arise from the understanding that multilingual exposure for children and students, especially those from low social classes can sometimes be problematic by the very sense in which ultimate performance in a language of instruction like English could constitute a challenge, in view of their previous exposure to other languages (Hoff 2013).

In another reaction, a commentator offers a discursive response that demonstrates a high level of concern for the young learners' coping strategies with multilingual curricula:

It is an exciting innovation but I sincerely pity students in Lagos because from my point of view, Chinese language is probably the most difficult thing to learn; just imagine 'chen cho chu quinton qui kyi doza' Can someone understand that?

(Nairaland)

An assumption such as the above is not unconnected with the perceived challenges associated with learning the language, especially with respect to the orthography, among foreign students away from China (Hu 2010). Nigerian children have to acquire their mother tongue, learn English and French at school and until recently one of the three national languages. For those that would be immersed in the Mandarin programme in Lagos, it means the learning of

a new language with a radically different orthography that tends more towards the pictorial. It informs the expression of worries about a state of mental confusion as the brain has to grapple with the intricacies of multiple languages.

In a counter reaction, other commentators dispel the fears, explaining that young people have the capacity to acquire and learn several languages without any negative consequence on their brains:

Introduce 3-year-olds to four different languages simultaneously, and their prodigiously developing brains will effortlessly assimilate a working vocabulary in all of those languages considerably faster than a six-year old could, and others of magnitude more rapidly than an adult student could hope to progress in mastering just one new language.

(Nairaland)

Research has proven that children have the innate capacity to acquire several languages simultaneously and without delay (Carroll 1999; Hofer and Jessner 2019). In fact, a knowledge of several languages is more beneficial to the child than knowing just one as polyglots have critical thinking abilities than their monolingual counterparts. Cook (2001) opines that learning several languages helps an individual not to be restricted to a single world-view considering that his brain will be exposed to greater cognitive flexibility.

Other reactions ask questions about the feasibility and efficiency of the programme. They argue that Nigerian schools have not been able to teach English and even French effectively, to say nothing of another foreign language:

My only problem is that the curriculum might not be practical and effective. We have the current case of French language, which most persons are forced to do in secondary school and then they can't even construct a single sentence in French...

(Nairaland)

Another netizen comments:

I compulsorily took lessons in French language from Primary school till JS3 (it became an optional subject at that point and I promptly dropped it) and now I wonder how effective all that has been.

(Nairaland)

The comments above allude to the failure of Nigerian schools to effectively teach French which was made compulsory for students up to junior high school level. They believe that the same fate may befall Mandarin which they feel may be a more difficult language for Nigerians to learn. However, some counter-reactions to this fear are expressed in the sentiment that Yoruba speakers might even find Mandarin easier to learn since both

languages share certain phonological and syntactic features, according to one of the contributors in the thread.

The last few comments underscore the excitement, contemplation and reflections that greet the introduction of new international languages into school curricula. Some tend to see such introduction as disruptive with capacity to impact local and indigenous languages for ill or for good, which is part of the indices of such international languages for the linguistic reflection of globalization (Zuckermann 2003). Yet others anticipate the capacity of learning such languages to confirm elite status on learners (Codó and Sunyol 2019), which is part of the reception Mandarin has had in different parts of the world.

Conclusion

The study has examined the move made by a past governor of Lagos State, Nigeria in 2012 to introduce the teaching of Mandarin in five public schools in the state. The announcement was received with mixed feelings as some Lagosians applaud the governor's initiative towards raising the economic status of youths in Lagos through alliance with China and her language. Critics express fears of cultural and linguistic imperialism as well as language conflict and loss, while also anxious about the effectiveness of the programme. The crux of the reactions is an admonition for Governor Fashola to be wary of China's interest in Lagos, and by extension Nigeria. Yet, others have expressed excitement over the prospects such learning has for the social and economic empowerment of the learners in the age of globalization. This essay is the first part of the study, which focuses on online reactions to the announcement.

The second stage will focus on ethnography of the development and evolution of Mandarin in the selected schools with the principal aim of exploring the dynamics of the formal acquisition against the backdrop of multilingualism in Lagos State.

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