

Celebrating English and the Nigerian Situation



The English Language Day

Covenant University joins the rest of the English speaking global community to mark the *English Language Day*. Since Nigeria's independence, English has continued to serve as Nigeria's first official language in terms of its functions, not only as a medium of social interactions among educated Nigerians from different ethnic groups, but also as the language of government, education, commerce and so forth. However, the continual role of English as Nigeria's nativised language of social and business communication is a reflection of the inability of the Nigerian society to develop a national language, perhaps due to the complexity of adopting one language from among over 450 indigenous languages, most of which are in danger of total extinction before the next fifty years. Efforts on some pilot projects to evolve a neutral national language have so far been unfruitful (e.g. WAZOBIA). Thus, English is likely to remain a neutral language of Nigeria's social and economic life with a consistently rising profile.

Currently an above-average pass in English is mandatory for admission to higher education in Nigeria; moreover, high communication skills in English are viewed as a reflection of high academic qualification. In other words, not being able to speak good English is equivalent to illiteracy. It is also true that the ability to speak the "near-native" variety of English holds a lot of promise, such as job placement, social recognition and privileges. This type of social ethos has its problems. For instance, an ongoing research has shown that the question, of which variety is native or "near-native," and which should be taught in school has not yet been answered. Consequently Nigeria remains "a dumping ground" for all kinds of English "varieties" with the speakers of these varieties highly respected.

Nigerian English, as one of world's Englishes, reflects the inherent sensitivity of the English language (or any other) to the cultures of its host community with its constant contact with local languages. Naturally, English is bound to respond to the features and nuances of these languages. Though still in the process of full nativisation, Nigerian English has its definite features marked by cultural "flavours" or "colourations" that reflect new ways of perceiving and constructing the host environment. This also accounts for the development of local varieties such as *Igbo English*

(Ingligbo) *Hausa English* (Enghausa), *Yoruba English* (Yorubanglish) and *Efik English* among others; these local varieties, however, are differentiated more at the level of phonology. In terms of standards, some Nigerian scholars have established the existence of standard and non-standard Nigerian English, which often vary on the basis of education, status and social exposure of the users.

As Nigeria joins the rest of the world to mark the English language day, we recognise the invaluable contribution of English in our social and cultural life. The cultural mediatory roles of English are highly commendable. However, given the global status of English as a world language, we could not have expected less. With the stiff competition for survival of Nigeria's indigenous languages vis-a-vis the socially assigned roles of English in Nigeria, we hope one day, to be able to celebrate with the rest of the world an "Igbo Language Day," a "Yoruba Language Day," or a "Hausa Language Day," among others.

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