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Language is one of the creations of the human society and it has its origin in a particular community after which it is named. Once in existence not even the "owners" can restrict its use to themselves because it becomes a property available to others in the attempt to facilitate communication between them, the owners and those whose convenience the language serves in conducting affairs of importance to them.

The partition of Africa in the 19th century by European powers gave little regard to ethnic cohesion and linguistic affinity in that the primary aim of the colonial administration was to make the language of the metropolis the language of social intercourse between the various ethnic groups while at the same time grooming an elite that was to serve its interests. It was, therefore, a deliberate policy of the European powers to promote their languages in territories under their control and relegate to the background local languages to the extent that at the end of colonial rule these European languages remained official languages regardless of the percentage of the population that speaks them.

Black Africa is today referred to broadly as English-speaking, French-speaking or Portuguese-speaking. The role these languages have had to play by accident of history in bringing formal westernized education to Africa enhanced their positions and as the artificial boundaries became national borders ethnic groups on both sides drifted further apart and viewed themselves as belonging to different nations. The European languages in question became the medium of expressing nationalism and conducting foreign policy. In 1961, a specialists' meeting recommended that a second European language "... should be considered not only as a means of communication between English-speaking and French-speaking countries in Africa, but also as an international language with a wider purpose which, jointly with the first language, would enable Africa to communicate with other countries of the world."

Once this became a policy adopted by African statesmen, the French and British governments embarked upon translating it into reality. In English-speaking countries, departments of modern European languages sprang up with French as the main language. The French government poured in

funds and personnel and centres for learning French were set up while scholarships were awarded to those willing to study the language. Thus, more than ever before independence, French culture became widespread to the effect that today there is hardly any institution of higher learning without a department of French. English was similarly encouraged in French-speaking countries. The increase in the number of Africans learning European languages has further helped in postponing the encouragement of the evolution of lingua francas or national languages.

One of the excuses for this can be found in the realm of politics. African countries, by their composition, are multi-national and hence multilingual and multicultural. The political structure of these countries has necessitated the caution in the approach to the adoption of national languages. Lessons have been learnt from the language riots in India, Sri Lanka and the turmoil in Belgium and Canada. It was thus thought that since the European languages are politically neutral, they should be left as the arbiters of linguistic peace. In Cameroon, English and French have successfully entrenched themselves as the peace-makers in the babel of tongues that left none of the local languages qualified for a national role. The compromise made Cameroon one of the few countries in Africa that has a bilingual policy with two European languages in that role.

In its history, the Federal Republic of Cameroon has the unique experience of having had contact with seven European languages - Portuguese, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, French, English and German in that order. Though German was the one that established itself as a social language among the educated, World War I put an end to that with the defeat of Germany. The country came under British and French control as Southern Cameroons and Northern Cameroons, respectively.

As can be deduced from all I have been saying, foreign languages have continued to play a significant role in the African society and it is in the field of education that much importance has been added to them. But before going into the achievements of those who have mastered these languages and turned them into vehicles of communicating African culture to the world, it may be necessary to focus briefly on North Africa which we regard as *Arab Africa*. During the period of colonialism, European languages featured prominently as official languages alongside Arabic which is now the dominant language in that part of the continent. But because Arab invasions originated in the 7th century earlier than the

European partition and thus brought Arabic to that part of Africa, the language is no more regarded as a foreign language in many of these countries. But we know that *Arabic* is a language from the Arabian peninsula which spread into the Fertile Crescent before coming into Africa.

What has given Arabic the status of an African language is the balance of the preponderance which has changed. About 60 per cent of the Arab community and over 70 per cent of Arab lands are in Africa. Despite this, however, the agitation of the Berbers in Algeria and Morocco for recognition indicate that Arabic is regarded by them as a foreign language. Incidentally, French is still very much in use just as Spanish and Hassania are in Western Sahara. Like countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, many countries of North Africa still find the French language a useful tool for international communication, for commerce, cultural exchange and as a medium of education.

Faced with the *fait accompli* of adopting these foreign languages as official languages and as media of instruction in our institutions of learning many Africans have turned the languages into instruments with which contribution has been made to scientific thought and historical investigation. In effect they have become the linguistic property of the countries using them and because of their existence side by side with African languages a lot of seepage has taken place and thereby they have been adopted to reflect African realities. Today, African literary writings in English and French are admired all over the world not only because of the ability to use them but also because of the cultural values attached to them.

Commenting on the use of the English language in West Africa, Spencer notes that it has become "... part of the linguistic property of those who use it, and if it is not a mother tongue it is not thereby a foreign language. For inasmuch as it is widely used, it is often used with a creativity and ebullience which must spring from a confident sense of ownership." What Spencer said of the English language also applies to French in the context of West Africa and others that use it.

The peculiar position of English and French is that, while not being mother tongues, they are at the same time not foreign languages. That is why English in a country like Nigeria is not regarded as a foreign language and so does not belong to those being taught in the various departments of foreign languages or modern European languages which include French,

Russian and German. The introduction of Russian and German shows the inclination to balance the presence of English and French in the curriculum of institutions of learning; and German as we have discovered lately is fast gaining ground in our universities to the extent that in the University of Ibadan, for instance, the number of applicants for admission this year alone is about four times the total of the number for French and Russian put together.

As alluded to earlier, German is not a total stranger to Africa. The circumstances that led to its limitation had to do with European politics. Despite series of policy fluctuations which occur with the political vicissitudes of newly independent countries, Namibia still has a sizeable proportion of its population using German - about 20 per cent, and it comes after Afrikaans - 65 per cent. English is a distant third with 10 per cent. We can then assume and rightly too that German, like French, English and Portuguese, plays some role as one of the European (foreign) languages in the African society today in spite of all. And the theme of this congress is appropriate in that language as a product of the society is part of the culture of a people and it has to be dynamic in reflecting the changes being brought about in the community to which it belongs. If English is no more foreign to Nigeria just like French is not to Zaire, then German cannot be foreign to Namibia.

I note that in spite of your theme "Language and Society: the role of foreign languages in the African society today" the sub-themes concentrate on the German society alongside African countries. They are vital in view of the position Germany is occupying in modern Europe especially since the re-unification which has brought some fear to European states. With unity, Germany suddenly became bigger than at the time of the division and it is potentially bolder and drawn to the East as well as to the West. Being Europe's economic powerhouse there is the fear that German leaders might aim at creating a German Europe instead of a European Germany. With this fear many a referendum on Maastricht have not been as overwhelming as the enthusiastic leaders themselves have been. France which was invaded by Germany three times in 70 years is worried just as Denmark is. But one would like to think that decades of democracy have removed the threat that Germany might constitute a danger to Europe.

As a consequence of history, Germans have been shy until recently about asserting German interests plainly or expressing national pride. Politicians

prefer to treat *Realpolitik* with suspicion while believing that foreign policy could and should be grounded in the defence of virtuous principles such as democracy, self-determination, free trade and human rights. But, it seems that unification has made Germans bolder in taking their place and playing their role in the world. As could be seen, Germany has since 1989 offered the most generous financial aid to post-communist East including commitments to Russia exceeding $50 billion or more than half the West total. That aside, Germany has been more assertive in its role in former Yugoslavia from where it has admitted over 300,000 refugees from the wars in that part. Those attributes about Germany will have to be taken along with the rising unemployment and violence against immigrants by the ultra-right and skinheads, some of whom marched recently in Bayreuth in memory of Adolf Hitler on the 105th anniversary of his birth. This incident coincided with the jailing in France of the Nazi collaborator, Paul Touvier, for assisting in rounding up of Jews for death camp. When we add to this estrangement of east and west Germans we see a hubbub with ominous echoes.

All these lead to the other side of German studies apart from language and literature - *Landeskunde*. Years of separate administrations and ideological differences have witnessed some slight differences in the vocabularies of the east and west. Attitudes to life are bound to be different and East German literature of that period of socialist rule was different in its orientation since it was meant to serve socialist realism and praise the dignity of labour especially among the proletariat of the world. The one-party system, the security apparatus, the foreign policy and the educational system are things that German studies should focus on albeit in historical perspective. It is when that is done that we can have a better understanding of modern Germany vis-a-vis its role in contemporary Europe.

Germany has provided the evidence that nations can and do change. The Federal Republic of Germany has to cope with the huge tasks thrown up by unification. We know that its federal system operates the most intricate checks and balances of any country in Europe. All the same the differences between east and west Germans in many respects are still to be overcome. Our role as foreign language teachers compels us to be versatile in the knowledge of the people and the country whose languages we teach. Gradually, we ourselves become absorbed in the cultures of the owners of these languages and indirectly acculturate our students. After all, knowledge of people and society, the mode of life and human experience,

the understanding of other systems and consequently a thorough understanding of our own are the main objectives of learning a foreign language. Therefore, Landeskunde should convey that understanding of "ethnic community" which is, in itself, closely linked with ethno-psychology, i.e. the study of national character. Apart from this, Landeskunde aims at preventing what is known as ethnocentrism - the tendency to appraise the traits of a different culture through the prism of one's own cultural values and traditions.

A person who assesses other people's culture from the point of view of his own may not appreciate the true value of such a culture in that such estimations tend to undervalue the culture. This is usually the case when one discovers that some cultural traits in the other people do not correspond with one's own.

This is, perhaps, responsible for Nicholas Hans' view on Africa when he writes: "The Black population of Africa has neither national traditions nor a national language" and that "although they are very capable they have not yet evolved a culture or national traditions which could sustain competition with European civilisation". He even goes further: "Left to their own cultural resources these tribes would be doomed to the role of manual workers and would never be able to acquire social equality with the Europeans." Of course, it is needless saying that the opposite of what Hans says is the case in that Africa possesses not only a national language but national languages and a variety of cultures which are today acclaimed all over the world.

What Hans fails to grasp is the fact that the peoples of Africa and Europe have different cultural backgrounds. England, France, Germany, Poland, Italy are all in Europe and the languages of these countries differ just like the cultures. Similarly, it would be wrong for an Englishman to take a disdainful look at, say, the Czech in terms of culture. Even the Bulgarians, though having a language similar to that of the Russians, still possess a different culture.

It is the attempt to prevent such a stand as Hans' that adds to the significance of teaching students of foreign languages Landeskunde alongside the language, though some people frown at the notion of combining language learning with cultural background studies of the native speakers since they see no link between the two. But the true

position, as rightly expressed by L.V. Shcherba, is that "every language reflects the culture of the people who speak it ", i.e. the natives. A thorough knowledge of a language, its rules and norms does not guarantee a full value of the communicative act if the corresponding background knowledge and all those components that make up the language as used by the native speakers are absent.

Coseriu was definitely right when he wrote inter alia: "It is impossible to speak in a language only by knowing its system: it is necessary to know the norms of the application of that system according to situations and contexts."

In a further attempt to bring to the reach of the foreign language student the culture of the country whose languages he is learning, attention has to be focused on literature. Of course, there is nothing new in our emphasizing that literature is the best expression of the spirit of the very people we are studying. It is also a known fact that a foreigner who is not properly prepared at best would be limited only to the simple understanding of the literary text. This could be traced to the lack of proper background knowledge of the people. As Maxim Gorky rightly pointed out, literature is the study of man himself since he is the principal actor in any piece of literature whose main objective is to mirror society. In analysing works of literature, therefore, it is vital to underline the ideas - social, political and artistic - that are therein reflected. Any analysis that is devoid of the human characters renders the problem posed unresolved. Really, it is extremely difficult to understand an author's ideas without penetrating into the depth of the human characters generally and in detail. Acquaintance with details in relation to society, enables us to draw a line of distinction between authors. This is why we can differentiate Pushkin from Gogol, Soyinka from Achebe, Aimé Cesaire from Oyono and Goethe from Schiller.

Analysis of psychological peculiarities of literary heroes should not lead either the author or the reader into the sphere of pure psychology or humanism. Literature should not be viewed as a representation of the psychological or spiritual life of man because a separate personality is a part of a large human collective, and the mental being of that personality is also part of the life of that very collective. Therefore, a hero cannot be examined outside the environment. And, in order to comprehend a given work of literature, it is necessary to understand the socio-historical

background. For example, a reader without a background knowledge of Russia in 1904 might not understand Chekhov's "Cherry Orchard". In fact, Chekhov himself expressed fears that this play might be a failure in Berlin and Vienna since they had no Lopakhins or students à la Trofimov. Literature in present day Africa, Asia and Latin America, is resurgent and the writers and artists of these continents are engaged in bringing out all they can to contribute to the building of a new civilisation in these continents and eventually, the world. Therefore, they are expected to express and interpret the views of their peoples and only in this light could their works be properly understood. As Barraclough correctly notes: "Literature, like politics, has broken through its European bonds, and the civilisation of the future ... is taking shape as a world civilization in which all the continents will play their part."

We agree with him and the evolution of a new civilisation would necessarily increase the demand for better knowledge and understanding of the various cultures that would combine to make this new civilisation.

Africa will continue to play its role in the forging of a world civilisation. But, in order to contribute substantially to this, African governments and international bodies have a significant role to play. That role is in the proper funding of education. Virtually all our universities are starved of funds to the extent that our *year-abroad* programmes have almost run aground partly because some people in authority do not value what we regard as *cultural immersion*. In spite of this, however, it is our duty to press on and make our contributions worth the while of those who pass through the portals of our institutions.