

The Study of Arabic Language in the Nigerian Armed Forces: Prospects and Problems

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Abstract

Language is very central to the existence of man. From early time, language has always been a communicative device; contributing to the development and growth of human societies. The ability to relate and harness his environment develops his capacity to reorder his activities to an appreciable level, made language significant. Language has always played a vital role in security challenges, gathering and above safety of lives and valuable property. Study has shown the ability of language to solve problems between people by creating the necessary atmosphere for understanding and peaceful resolution of differences. A breakdown of communication has often been responsible for misunderstanding in a society and among communities or nations that sometimes result into full scale war. The need of Arabic language among members of the Nigerian Armed Forces in relation to their international assignments in peace keeping operations is one major concern in this paper. The paper thus examines the prospects and problems of the study of Arabic language among officers and men of the Nigerian Armed Forces. While discussing language generally; its role in defense and diplomacy cannot be over emphasized. Its roles in strategic activities policy enunciations and implementations. The paper gives some recommendations on how to improve on the study of Arabic language in the Armed Forces of Nigeria.

Introduction

The importance of language in any field of human endeavor cannot be over-emphasized. This is because it is the medium through which thoughts and feelings are communicated. It is the tool through which businesses are conducted, and even policies are articulated and interpret in governance. It is used in the sciences, technology, philosophy, defence and poetry among others. It is pertinent to note therefore, that any breakdown in communication between any two or more parties brings about quarrels, clashes, wars and conflicts which permeate the world in the contemporary time. It is through language that people interact meaningfully for the purpose of harnessing natural resources and human capital progress and development. Since the importance of language permeates all human endeavors, its study by the officers of the Nigerian Armed Forces and its role in defence is worth discussing, especially when one looks at the place of defence in national interest.

Arabic as a language has contributed immensely to the growth of different Nigerian societies. The history of Nigeria would hardly be complete without mentioning the vital role played by the contact of Arab with the world. For several centuries 1000 and 1900 AD Arabic was used in one form or the other as official language of administration, commerce, diplomacy, intelligence, education and instruction. However, Arabic is facing several challenges today the least of which is its misconception as a religious language. This misconception is predominant in Nigeria both within and outside the Nigerian Armed Forces.

Conceptual Frame Work

Before going into the main discourse, it is important to define the key words, language within its conceptional frame of analysis. Many scholars have discussed the word language, its functions, its role, its types as it affects man, animal and other creatures' Procter describes it as a system consisting of a set of small parts and an act of rules which decides the ways in which they can be put or joined together to issue out a message that has meaningful information. Spair in Udoada³ sees it as purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, desires and emotions, by means of a system of voluntary produced vocal symbols By this position, language is core and central to culture. Typesi, the Encyclopedia Americana⁴ lamented the efficiency of Language Skills in deaf communities, in which the aural system of communication is not available and made it easier for visual system to be exploited for the sign language for the deaf.

“Language-noises accepted and means of covering the impulses arising in one human mind to another-mutual, agreement to interpret certain sounds each time uttered as of the same significance the grunt of fear or warning-the roar of range-the coo of love-and so to name of objects-op phrases-to orders like “come”, go “fetch”, run and finally to abstractions, concepts, ideas projects, worship of the forces controlling capricious nature, with language, social living and true civilization came to birth. When signs were accepted as representing the arbitrary sounds that represented ideas, prehistory emerge into written history”⁵.

A part from deaf language of sign, another important thing to note is the use of language in communicating with animals, more especially those animals that are known or described as “domestic animals”. Lawal⁶ explains that; In order to cooperate, animals must be able to communicate. They do this in a buffing number of ways, using and all of their sense organs, compared to human speech, their languages is simple, the difference between a growth and an articulated word, yet, whatever the method, whenever the communicants to be a paired of mating toads or a town of prairie dogs, they manage to be understand.

Deriving from the above, language is seen as “the system of sounds and words used by humans to express their thoughts, ideas, mores and feelings. Language is a means of communication among beings; it is certainly the most important”⁷ variables in human existence and transactions. There are however other languages that could be included in the quoted definition above. One of these is the language of signs such as the use of bodily movements like frowns, shrugs and head shakings which show either approval or disapproval and so on. There are also apparently non-linguistic means of communication in addition to that which are no more than symbolic systems for language itself, for instance morse-code, shorthand and sign language. In this paper, language is apply to mean a system of expressing feelings and thoughts used by humans to communicate among themselves. Such expression of feelings and thoughts can be gesturecular, verbal or written.

Pre-colonial Status of Arabic in Nigeria

It is pertinent to refer to history so as to be able to identify the status of Arabic in the modern dispensation. This is because the future of Arabic cannot be known or be appreciated without the knowledge of the past. Arabic has played a very important role in Nigerian history before the coming of the white man’s rule⁸. Galadanci⁹ observed that Arabic lasted for many centuries as an official language in most countries of the West African sub region and was well established particularly in Northern Nigeria. Before the Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio, Arabic was the official language of administration and court records. It was the medium through which letters were exchanged between the Emirs in the Northern provinces. It was the language of education, diplomacy, politics and commerce.¹⁰ Galadanci¹¹ Al-Ilori¹² Al-Jannari¹³ documented that Arab merchants passed through Northern Nigeria on their way to Syria and some parts of Eastern Africa with their goods which included skins, perfumes, and dates. Bidmos affirmed that it was this interaction that influenced the Hausa language to absorb many words and nouns from Arabic. Abubakre observed the existence of Arabic and its importance to Africa and Nigeria as a language of education and commerce long before the advent of colonial rule.¹⁴

The Place of Arabic in National Defense

The Nigerian Armed Forces is an instrument for both internal security and external Defence of the country. Defence however cannot be pinned down to a single definition. This partly arises because of the way people perceive it. In its simplest form “defending somebody, weapons, barriers, or Military measures for protecting a country”¹⁵. It is the capability or means of resisting an attack, protection: i.e. protective piece of amour; vindication. To The American Heritage Dictionary of English Language, defence as “the act of defending against attack, danger or injury, protection, anything that defends or protects”¹⁶. In Psychoanalysis description, it is seen as an unconsciously acquired involuntarily operating mental attribute, mechanism, or dynamism such as regression, repression, reaction, formation or protecting the individual from shame, anxiety or loss of self esteem. From the foregoing definitions, Defence is not limited to only what people may term as the protection of a country from external aggression, which is the major responsibility of the Armed Forces. But rather, it implies all those ways that human beings adopt in order to be secured using all forms of method including language. In other words, whatever method one adopts in order to be safe from harm is Defence. This being the case, the issue of learning Arabic language by our Armed Forces is vital. Learning Arabic therefore begins from a small unit of the Armed Forces as we do have in the Nigerian Army School of Education (NASE) Ilorin, or in a way of social interaction with the speakers. This could be by a small family, or community, state or nation.

Similarly, we may use the term Defence to refer to protecting one's political, economic, social and even spiritual interests. We therefore, consider and apply the concept of Defence in this paper from its wider meaning or perspective. It is however worth noting that although Defence is an important factor in the life of every individual and even society as a whole, Defence can as well be achieved through the proper use of language as part of communication. This is where the discussion of the role of Arabic language to the Armed Forces of Nigeria becomes crucial and worthwhile.

The Armed Forces and the Need of Arabic Language:

Understanding an International Language like Arabic by the three major branches of the Nigerian Armed Forces (Army, Air Force and Navy) is quite important. Arabic is particularly of a very high value because the language will assist the military on peace keeping in various countries especially those countries where they exist. Study of this Language while on operations, especially in terms of signals and intercepting communication will be of a great importance. For instance, it was reported in a BBC broadcast in August, 1992 on a special program that some officers from Nigerian Armed Forces lost their lives in Somalia due to their ignorance of the language spoken by the enemies in the area of operation. Even though the then commander could hear the communication between the rebels but he could not understand and interpret the contents and thereby led his company into enemy's fire and about ten of them were killed.

On the relation of military intelligence, the knowledge of Arabic language is very important to those officers going for Defence attachment in the Arab nations. For these reasons (i.e. Military Intelligence, Signal, Attachment, Peace keeping, etc.) and the need to teach these international languages to the officer cadets of NDA and Nigerian Armed Forces, cannot be overemphasized. In order to promote the study of Arabic; to prepare the Armed Forces in basic language understanding the Ministry of Defence began establishment of language school. The first step towards achieving this was the establishment of the Nigerian Army School of Languages in Ilorin in 1980. Nigeria's leadership role in Africa requires the Armed Forces to be familiar with the major languages in the continent.

Problems Facing the Teaching of Arabic Language

There are a lot of problems facing the teaching and learning of Arabic language within the Nigerian Armed Forces today. The status of acceptance of Arabic in the minds of many Nigerians within and outside the Armed Forces cannot be over-emphasized. The problems can be classified into the internal and external problems.

Internal Problems:

a. Lack of learning materials: There are problems on how to improve on the learning materials. Such problems include lack of unified textbooks which will be accepted by all those concerned in teaching and learning of Arabic. The textbooks being used now by many Arabic schools or institutions are imported from Arab countries e.g. *An-Nahwul-Wadhih, Al-Balaaghatul-Wadhihah, Al-Mufasssal fil Adabil Arabiy, Al-Muntakhab fil Adabil Arabiy* to mention but few, are all imported textbooks which were mostly developed and might have been dropped by these Arab countries. The exercises contained in these books are mostly suitable only for the Arab societies. Some nouns contained therein can only be understood by the students living in the Arab environment.

b. Need to update Arabic curriculum: There had been an old curriculum of Arabic studies in Nigeria. The teaching and learning of Arabic literature of the ancient Arabs or the pre-Islamic Arabic literature to the students is common in the institutions of learning in Nigeria. This type of literature has its advantage. It equally has side effects or disadvantage in learning the language. The student must be very good enough to commit those beautiful prose and poems to his memory. As such, there is need to have a new curriculum which takes into consideration various differences of

c. Lack of Qualified Teachers: There are some teachers teaching the subject but most of them use outdated methods of teaching. The old traditional method of teaching Arabic is very much in existence in most of our institutions. Hardly can a language laboratory be used by Arabic teachers as most of them do not know it is in existence let alone how to use it¹⁸. There is the need therefore,

d. Non Challant Attitude of the Native Speakers: Most native speakers of Arabic are fond of “*I don’t care*” attitude towards the spread of Arabic. Arabs themselves are sometimes proving to speak foreign languages to foreigners on visit to their countries. Equally the embassies of Arab nations in Nigeria unlike their French counterpart are reluctant in extending assistance to teaching the language. There used to be some kind of assistance to students in form of literature and text books gifts. But after the terrorist attack on the United States on 11th September 2000, the assistance was stopped out of fear of the American led war against terrorism. This, of course, led to a drastic drop in the receipt of assistance from Arabs generally. In addition, most Arabic speakers do not encourage their children to learn, teach and propagate Arabic. There are some who learnt the language to the level of professorship, but may have no children who can wear their caps or can step into their shoes. There are also some primary school Arabic teachers who sometimes do not like to be associated with the subject out of inferiority complex. There is need therefore for attitudinal change among speakers of Arabic; incentives should be provided to fresh lecturers and teachers.

e. Lack of Publishers: It could be mentioned at this juncture that there are no enough qualified printing press in Nigeria to handle Arabic printing. Those existing are very few; even typing of Arabic is more expensive than any other language e.g. while English is typed at forty naira (₦40.00) only per page in the Kaduna metropolis, Arabic is between sixty and one hundred naira (₦100.00) only per page. There are less than 5% of business centers that cater for Arabic among the business centers around Kaduna metropolis. All these are due to non patronage and encouragement.

f. Financial Problems: There are quite a number of professionals that had authored some text books that could serve as a good syllabus for Arabic schools a crossed the levels. Due to financial difficulties that involve publications, they could not publish them.

g. Misconception about Arabic: one of the major problem facing the study of Arabic is the misconception by some people that Arabic is a language of religion of Islam. This in return, leads to direct victimization of the language and sometimes those who teach it. While such is noticed in some governmental schools, in private schools it is not being taught except in such schools that belong to those proprietors that are interested in it. There is no doubt that Arabic language is linked to Islam especially its spread across borders. But Arabic should be seen as an international communication device that is there to be appreciated by those deserving it. Since English is not associated with Christianity Arabic should not face this unwarranted charge.

h. Government Policy: Federal Government under the leadership of late General Sani Abacha announced the relegation of Arabic to the third position. While making French as second language to English. This policy has given those that are not interested in Arabic chance to exploit that situation to the best of their ability. Though the government claims it is to the benefit of Nigeria's border transaction, the same reasons adduced also qualify Arabic to be upgraded. Today Nigeria and its Armed Forces and security leading partner in peace keeping, enforcement and peace negotiation. These global services have taken the country to several Arabic speaking nations like Lebanon, Somali, Sudan, Dafur and of recent Mali. As such, Nigeria needs to productively and properly legislate on the officialization of Arabic as a language. This position, no doubt can propel governments' various organs to move positively towards the language.

Teaching of Arabic in the Nigerian Defence Academy

The Department of Languages of the Nigerian Defence Academy was established in 1997 with the main goal of setting up degree programmes in Arabic and French and to render related services to the Academy. The Federal Government's initiative in this direction is both laudable and commendable. It is in fandum with the universal requirement for effective communication strategy in any serious military establishment. Multilingualism is a frontier, regional and continental need for Nigeria as a nation considering the country's neighborhood structure and its role in Africa, a continent in which Arabic and French along with English are the official linguistic vehicles of over ninety percent of its citizens. Nigerian Armed Forces cannot adequately play its role without being effectively armed with sophisticated tools of multilingual communication. Thus, while there is such corps in the forces focusing on various other specialized needs like engineering, signaling, intelligence, education, and so on, there ought to be a multilingual unit perhaps called the linguistic corps in all the services of the Armed Forces to handle the issue of multilingual communication.

As the Nigerian Defence Academy is the only Military University in the country and the main source of producing military officers for all the three services of the Armed Forces, it is the right milieu to cultivate these vital foundations necessary for the military. The Department of Languages is profoundly conscious of this need and has been playing its role in this regard since its establishment. It has so far developed the administrative and curricular structures for running degree programmes in Arabic language and has graduated some officers in the language who now serving in various units of the Armed Forces, intelligence inclusive. This could be regarded as one of the major prospects of teaching Arabic in the Nigerian Armed Forces since it was established. However, after years of teaching the language with others, mainly French, there was a policy alteration which seduced Arabic in the department to non effective status of optional elective, the followed by entire stoppage.

There is no doubt that this cancellation of the study of the language to a degree in dysfunctional to all known benefits; more so, religious sentiment and jaundice political contestation were allowed to play dominant role, the cancellation which are both detrimental to normal and cooperate interest of Nigeria. Again, after realizing its error, the termination of the study of the language, Arabic studies was returned in the year 2009 only to be stopped in on influences and lightly criticized 2011 in public pronouncement by Haliru Bello a former minister of Defence published in Daily Trust of Wednesday, January 18th 2012 page 11. Ironically Haliru Bello's great ancestors, Shehu Usman Danfodio and Ahmad Bello popularized Arabic faction forms.

That included but not committed to literary works and administration documentation. Bello's reason of preventing that enrollment and enforcement of elements of Boko Haram into the Academy is not convincing. Since its inception especially its university status in 1985, the Academy has not witnessed any scene and no case of religious tolerance and extremist. Such contention is not only untenable it is unto the heal to them literal and deface growth and progress of the Nigeria. With the sack of Haliru Bello the Defence High Command is again systematically reintroducing both Arabic and French studies in the Premier West African Military University, Arabic and French language studies are currently compulsory options. Multilingualism is a universal need for modern life where contacts, communication and media have been compressed into a planetary global village. The choice of Arabic as the starting point for the Department's language programme is very vital. Arabic should be highly valued in the Nigerian Armed forces. In addition to the availability of degree programmes in languages in NDA, Arabic is among the languages being taught in the Nigerian Army School of Education (NASE) in Ilorin.

The other services can also benefit from the two languages if the Academy Directorate of Military Training's (DMT) programme encompasses Arabic. Both Arabic and other languages are critical to Nigeria. Arabic is a co-official Language in Chad a neighboring country with which Nigeria shares water resources and other interests. In addition, Arabic is the official and national language of a large number of African countries, such as Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, Mauritania, Somalia to mention but a few. With Nigeria's increasing profile in Africa's security, its leadership role requires our Armed Forces' familiarity with the linguistic traditions of such large chunks of a continent we hope to lead. Due to Nigeria's globally acknowledged role in peace keeping operations in the West African sub-region, Nigeria's Armed Forces may be required to play continental roles of peace keeping. In such eventualities Nigerian Armed Forces should be adequately equipped with languages of the continent in which Arabic is the dominant language of the majority of the inhabitants for smooth field operations, signaling need and other communication and planning exigencies.

The teaching of Arabic language will no doubt be prosperous to the Nigerian Armed Forces. This is because Nigeria is seeking an African permanent membership in the UN Security Council to represent the continent. This requires a broader international linguistic profile for our Armed Forces to encompass Arabic which is among the most valued languages of the continent is extremely important. It will attract respect for Nigeria, trust and confidence for our Armed Forces that will be well equipped with Continental communication tools. The following reasons may be stressed as additional point that makes it necessary to teach Arabic language to our cadets in NDA: There is a widely appreciated need for our Armed Forces familiarity with Arabic. In the Nigerian Defence Academy's passing out of parade (POP) of September 2000 a Retired General and a former Commandant of the Academy Zamani Lekot invited as the Guest of Honour at the Commandant's Luncheon has observed the need for a strong linguistic base in Arabic and French within the Nigerian Armed Forces. Nigerian Armed Forces will not only need the Arabic Language in operations but in diverse military need in such assignments as Military Attaches or Defence Advisors to Arab nations in Africa, Asia and other nations. It is interesting to know that Arabic is been taught widely in US military Academies since many decades now. This is the language with which they were able to penetrate effectively into the Middle East.²⁰

Arabic is 4th ²¹ most spoken languages of the World, it is one of the languages of the United Nations Organization, AU, Arab League and many other International Organizations that Nigeria is either a member or have agreement or a bilateral relation with. Many countries have joined US in boosting their teaching and learning of Arabic as one of their important and effective weapon to fight terrorism. Nigeria, having only NDA as the only degree awarding institution need not to abolish the teaching of Arabic as it is presently being witnessed. In War against Terrorism many countries have joined the US in boosting the teaching and learning of Arabic as one the most important and effective weapon to combat terrorism. This is because the September 11 incident at the World Trade Center of US was said to have been hatched and conducted in Arabic. Nigeria, having Nigerian Defence Academy as the only Degree awarding University, in which future generals and high ranking officers are being trained needs to improve and enhance the teaching of Arabic ²². Arabic is taught in the British Army Military Academy, British Defence School of Languages, British Military Language School, British Academy PORTAL and Department of Diplomacy and applied languages²³. Canada has intensified the teaching of Arabic to the Canadian intelligence officers. Former President Olusegun Obasanjo was one of the contestants for the seat of the United Nation Secretary General in 1990 against the Egyptian native, Butrus Butrus Ghali. He however lost this prime opportunity because he speaks only English and Yoruba while Mr. Butrus Ghali speaks Arabic, English and French.

The first US Iraqi leader who speaks a sound Arabic language, which made him one of the best-retired US Military officers considered for that assignment. United Nations (UN) has accepted and since sent thousands of soldiers to assist in restoring peace in Darfur, Southern Sudan. Former Nigerian President also indicated his interest and sent a Memo to the Legislators, which was approved on Tuesday 17, August 2004. The Nigerian Armed Forces are since in Darfur in the company of UN, rendering their necessary service in peacekeeping. It is a region where the armed Arab *Janjawis* are killing the non-Arab black citizens without in racial pogrom.

Nigeria has not only sent the troops there, but is leading the Peacekeeping Army of African Union (AU) there. This is because Nigeria was on the seat of leadership of the African Union (AU). Definitely, the Army on this assignment needs Arabic language to boost their morale on this important national and international duty in Sudan. Nigeria is assisting and cooperating in the global current war against terrorism and right now preparing for Somalia. Nigeria is also leading African contingent segment in Mali led by France fighting Mali militants that have unleashed terror in the sub region. On this crucial assignment, Arabic is crucial on Nigerian government is currently recruiting Arabic speakers to ease communication problem of its troops. Thus, importance of Arabic language does not lie only on diplomatic ties, but it is also very crucial to solving other problems such as terrorism.

In order to be able render effective services to the country and her citizens both formerly and international levels, the used to make Arabic one of the official languages it cannot be disputed infect, it is mandatory, it should be supported by all Act of Parliament. Being military university, Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna, Nigeria ought to have Arabic both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The Academy through bilateral relation and of recent Nigeria government with other Africa countries co-opt to train foreign cadets on it. This will boost Nigeria domineering role and engender productive continental security and diplomatic capacity.

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