

# Speaking English badly

by GWYNNE DYER

It is a matter of chronic surprise that politicians, otherwise well-trained in saying just the right thing for the audience they are addressing, forget that whatever they say can be heard everywhere. Right away. By anybody who cares to listen, including journalists always hungry for the next story.

And thus to Kenya's President William Ruto, who was in Italy last week talking up his country's virtues. One of his claims was that Kenyans speak 'some of the best English in the world' and then, noticing that the audience was dozing off and in need of a joke, went on to say that Nigerian-accented English, by contrast, was incomprehensible.

He got such a big laugh (most of the audience were Kenyans living in Italy) that he kept going. 'If you listen to a Nigerian speaking, you don't know what they are saying - you need a translator.' Another big laugh and then the social media all over Africa lit up with protests.

How dare Ruto mock fellow Africans? Why should Africans be speaking a colonial language like English anyway? And who the hell did he think he was to judge the quality of Nigerian English? He was thoroughly spanked and sent to bed without supper by the media but it does open some interesting questions.

Why, more than 50 years after most countries in sub-Saharan Africa got their independence, do almost all of them still teach the language of their former colonial ruler in their schools? It's mainly because at least 1,500 living languages are still spoken in those countries, and very few of them are spoken widely enough to be the sole language of an entire country.

A few do reach that bar - Somali, for example - but the more usual situation is for a country to have three or four or more major languages (more than a million speakers, say), plus a large number of smaller languages.

Five thousand years ago almost everybody lived in little communities defined by kinship and language. However, the empires rolled back and forth across Eurasia for all of those years, grinding those little tribal groups into far larger language communities.

Eurasian diseases then almost wiped out the vulnerable native populations of the Americas and Australia (the real 'great replacement' of history), leaving only Africans (who were not vulnerable to Eurasian diseases) still alive and living mostly in smallish groups, each with its own language.

It was a triumph, of sorts: they were the last people standing who retained their original languages and cultures. But the colonialists arrived in the past few centuries, drew much wider borders and then left in a hurry, leaving the Africans themselves to rationalize the pot-pourri of ethnic groups that they left behind those new frontiers.

The only way to avoid a century of border wars was to freeze every colonial border where it was, however illogical, and the old Organization of African Unity (now trading as the African Union) got that right. Then the newly independent states behind those borders had to have a common language to function at all.

Again, the solution was arbitrary but unavoidable. If there is no language that is spoken by, say, at least three-quarters of the population, then choosing any indigenous language to be the sole national language will create a large permanent grievance in the parts of the population that do not speak it.

Far better to build on the existing school system (which will be operating in French, English or Portuguese already) and put everybody at the same disadvantage. It may not even be a disadvantage, in the end: those languages will have much bigger vocabularies and allow access to far more copious resources.

It's working out fairly well, in the sense that almost everybody has a 'home' language which they use for most domestic purposes. At the same time, around half the people in most countries also has a least a limited command of the 'colonial' language, in which they can communicate with everybody else.

This doesn't justify anybody mocking the way Nigerians speak English, but there's more going on here than meets the eye (well, ear). Nigeria is Africa's giant, with twice the population of any other African country, and Nigerians are not shy about blowing their own horns. This earns them the disdain and the envy of other Africans in about equal measure.

But enough of this mealy-mouthed 'on-the-one-hand; on-the-other-hand.' What you really want to know, I'm sure, is whether other English-speakers really need to call in a translator when they are talking to a Nigerian.

The answer is no, it's not that bad ? but I do find that I'm working much harder to understand a Nigerian's English than a Kenyan's. Almost as hard as when I'm talking to a working-class Glaswegian.