

Linguistic Rights: An Imperative for Indigenous Language Development towards Rural Entrepreneurial Enhancement

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Abstract

Linguistic rights, especially for the indigenous people that are mostly found in the rural areas, are relevant to their development. Every race and languages should have the freedom and right to develop in their communities using their native languages and not have extraneous languages imposed on them without their consent. Some people have been disenfranchised and isolated from development and also alienated from national development, participatory governance/politics because they are only knowledgeable in their indigenous languages. Hence, they do not have access to the so called official language and thereby isolated. We need to recognize their right to national discourse, education through their indigenous languages as bona fide citizens of the state they belong to. There is the need for capacity building towards enhancing indigenous language skills of the Adult/Mass Literacy educators who will be saddled with the responsibility of teaching and enlightening them in areas such as skills acquisition and skills enhancement, entrepreneurial development and subsequent utilization for economic transformation. We have to look towards the rural populace who has a lot of traditional skills and ingenuity to showcase both to Nigeria and the world. The quest for sustainable economy should take us to the rural people to harness their untapped potentials for the much desired national growth and economic transformation. The paper advocates that such a programme be done in the indigenous languages. Thus, the rural educators need to be abreast with indigenous languages to properly harness the entrepreneurial potentials that abound in the rural people and the unschooled. The paper calls for a concerted effort and synergy among all stakeholders for capacity building in the indigenous Nigerian languages towards co-coordinating and harnessing the enormous talents and potentials embedded with the rural populace who are mostly unschooled. This can be done effectively when we identify the indigenous languages needs for training and retraining purposes.

Key words: Linguistic rights, rural development, rural education, adult/mass literacy, entrepreneurial development, national and economic growth

1.0 Introduction.

There are enormous talents, skills, ingenuity that are bound in the rural populace and the among the unschooled in Nigeria. Most of these indigenous resources are fast being lost or eroded because there is no coordination towards their preservation or passing them to generations yet to come. We hardly know of any agency that is saddled with the responsibility of the education of these rural and unschooled people on how to improve their trades and skills, develop a framework and modules for them to train others in their various areas of specialization. We are of the position that instead of wasting government resources in running adult education towards making these special set of people educated in English and the Whiteman's way of life, get them sharpened in their indigenous languages, that is the languages of their immediate environment. They have the alienable right to speak their languages, transact businesses in their language, develop their various trades and be empowered to use same language to achieve several feats that the imported language can achieve for those that know and use them. Besides the fear of loss, is the issue of harnessing them towards rural economic development and national economic development.

1.1 Language rights issues in Nigeria

The use of English, a second language as a common language has denied many their linguistic rights in Nigeria. As regards this Banjo (1985:97) asserts:

The case for English has always been overstated. It is true that English in Nigeria is a common language, but only for the educated elites. Perhaps as many as 90 percent of our people in both the urban and rural areas are untouched by its communicative role

Arising from the recognition of three indigenous languages Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba as the major languages and tagging some minority languages was a tumult and revolt by the so called minority languages that led to the downplay of the term minority whenever Nigerian national languages are being discussed. People such as Bini would argue that giving the three aforementioned languages the tag of major definite means that all other Nigerian languages are minor whereas they are in no way minor in when issues of ethnicity and race is being considered in Nigeria. Recently, Ijaw is claiming to be the fourth largest linguistic group in Nigeria and would want their linguistic rights recognized and respected. One would wonder what the fuss about own languages. The

reasons may be political as suggested by Agbedo (2007) or spiritual as muted by Cook (2003). Cook believes that for one to understand culture and language of a people, there is need to use the original language and not translations which he said is motivated by a vague belief 'in the spirit of language'. Hence, we can allude that language is a spirit or that there is a spirit behind language. Maduka (2007:100) harps on Bambose (1991:22) vertical integration which focuses on "the adoption of one or more indigenous languages as tools for integrating the marginalized masses into the prevailing political system". Maduka rightly observes that the use of languages not common to the people excludes many from participating actively in the political terrain. Agbedo (2007) examines language as an instrument of exclusion in Nigeria. In his words (p.136), "we shall seek to examine the concept of exclusion and how the efficacy of language as instrument of exclusion has been used by the millieux dirigeants to exclude the vast majority of Nigerians from participating in the overall national development process". He posits further that linguistic capabilities are being used indirectly by the minority ruling class to deny the vast majority of Nigerians their rights of participation in the socio economic and political activities. He sums up these tendencies by the privileged ruling class as injustice and marginalization. There is a level of linguistic inequality playing out in various areas of national existence being gradually institutionalized by the privileged few rather than addressing the linguistic imbalance through mass literacy programmes. Agbedo (2007:147) notes:

So far, realities on ground point ominously to the fact that the vast majority of Nigerian populace is becoming increasingly excluded from participating in the management of the nation's affairs given the tenacity with which the millieux dirigeants hold on to the primacy of language. In the light of this, we are inclined to argue that one effective way to turn things around in favour of us all and redress the obvious oddities and absurdities that characterize our national polity is to defreeze the enslaving fog of ignorance and illiteracy that has warped the collective psyche of the masses for too long and mobilize them for active participation in the day to day management of the nation's affairs.

The issue of language rights pervades all areas of human existence both at national and individual levels. The concept of linguisticism further gives us an idea of linguistic rights and denial of same. Agbedo (2007) cites Skutnabb-Kangas (1988:13) who defines it as "the ideologies and structures which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and non-material) between groups which are defined on the basis of language (on the basis of their mother-tongues). Agbedo (2007:118) notes that "linguicism is also defined as the absence of language rights including the following:

- (i) every child should have the right to identify positively with her original mother tongue(s) and have her identification accepted and respected by others;
- (ii) every child should have the right to learn the mother tongue(s) fully;
- (iii) every child should have the right to choose when s/he wants to use the mother tongue(s) in official situations.

From the foregoing, we can say that the Nigerian child (and the adult local populace who grew from childhood) is the worst hit in denial of linguistic rights. The second language has inadvertently been imposed on the Nigerian child in schools and even at homes. Chumbow (1990) listed many advantages in using mother-tongue in education noting the success of such programmes in several countries of the world. The indigenous entrepreneurs are not left out. They are forced to use English when they go to banks and other financial institutions for transactions that will improve their businesses. Besides, manuals and instructions that will add value to their skills and trades are stored in strange languages. The rural entrepreneur who is highly knowledgeable in his indigenous language may boldly ask: Why must I learn English? Why must I transact and operate my bank account or ATM in English? Why must I be attended to in some basic things of life like driving lessons, health care in English? Why can't we have local products by local people packaged and marketed in their local language?

2.0 Nigerian indigenous languages and entrepreneurship

Ezikeojiaku (2007:114) observe that people think more productively in their indigenous languages and posits that:

A scientific impetus or technology acquired in a learner's indigenous language becomes second nature to the person. Nigeria and indeed Africa can only achieve mass scientific literacy needed for her technological and scientific development through the medium of the indigenous language(s)

Uguru (2007) observes that the best way to study and transfer indigenous technology is through the indigenous languages in which they exist. Uguru (2007:106-107) further posits:

Since most experts in our indigenous technologies cannot speak English, only an improved study of these languages embodying them can ensure the sustenance and survival of such technologies. Our problem does not lie in the non-existence of an indigenous national language,

rather it stems from the relegation of our indigenous languages, which embody our local technologies.... It is a grave error to think that science and technology can only learnt in the white man's language.

From the foregoing, we can understand that indigenous languages has been linked to national development but Nigeria has been paying lip service to use and development of Nigerian indigenous languages while developing and making full and practical use of the second language, English, in all spheres of national existence. If Nigeria continues to develop few Nigerians in the language of the white man and neglect the greater number of technologically skilled masses, two things happen. The indigenous technologists suffer denials and the much desired scientific and technological development will continue to be elusive. In line with the foregoing, according to Ezikeojiaku (2007:114) "it is instructive to observe that all technologically advanced countries develop their scientific impetuses and technologies in their respective languages. He further stresses that the efforts at the scientific process in Nigeria will work better by imparting of science literacy in the indigenous languages which are obviously understood by the majority of the masses.

The following captures the language situation in Nigeria.

It is said that the world has shrunk. People speak of a global village. By attaining the capacity to travel 20,000 miles per hour and by our accent on speed, we have made the distant familiar, but we have made the neighbour a stranger. We have acquired a language to communicate with the distant, across nations, but we have no language to communicate with the neighbour. (Source - http://www.ciil-ebooks.net/html/educulture/l_ind.htm)

We have a situation where the masses that cannot speak nor understand English are disenfranchised from having access to certain rights and privileges because English has become the order of the day. Agbedo (2005) aptly exposes the incapacitation of non-English speaking Nigerians who has great potentials in participating fully in the Nigerian democratic process. But these folks are great political achievers in their various communities where they can use their indigenous languages. Agbedo makes us to understand that it is a blatant denial of linguistic rights to entrench English as the language of participatory democracy in Nigeria. This situation he believes process has denied the masses, which are versed in the indigenous languages the contributory rights and access to development politically. This trend may have to continue perpetually and the masses linguistic rights kept in waiting until adequate arrangements have been made to accommodate the indigenous languages as proposed by the *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*. The same goes in the area of entrepreneurship.

Ahamefula (2011:16) favours the development and use of indigenous Nigerian languages in an effort to empower rural entrepreneurs towards national development and comments:

It is believed that there are lots of traditional or indigenous science and technology that have been bottled up with the rural populace who have little or no contact with the white man's education, hence, could not grapple with the mechanics of English. Such indigenous potential which are sometimes dismissed as local or crude are in essence the livewire or the nucleus of any right thinking nation and if properly harnessed and developed shall ultimately contribute immensely to the Nigerian quest for national development. Such great potentials have been discovered in various areas such as cloth making, knitting, food delicacies and dishes including varieties of food products like peanut butter (ose oji), blacksmithing, pottery, cane and other traditional arts and craft, weaving, basket making, soap making, herbal medicine, oral literature etc. These traditional heritages should be documented in the various indigenous languages they occur and also be translated into the other indigenous languages within the country so there would be cross cultural sharing of ideas and transfer of technology from one culture to the other.

The indigenous entrepreneurs have the right to carry on with their business and trade in their native languages which they know so well and need to be given the opportunity to contribute to the overall economic development of the nation. A well designed informal educational programme delivered in their indigenous languages would serve this purpose. This will also empower them to be better prepared to pass on these skills to other generations and also produce, package market their products and services according to modern trends. They have the right to know and participate in their native languages and not be overburdened with the white man's language.

2.1 Nigerian indigenous languages and rural education

Researchers have shown that people are better educated in their mother tongue or the language of their immediate environment. Cook (2003:57) asserts:

The corollary of this view is that if someone is to express themselves fully, they may need to do so in their own language. To preserve their culture, they must have the right to educate their children in that language. These needs, which have been referred to as language rights, have clear implications for language planning. They are implicit in a good deal of national and

international legislation, ensuring the possibility of own use both in formal transactions and schools. On the other hand, there are many contexts where language rights are denied and linguistic majorities impose upon minorities, often through oppressive legislation. With increasing frequency such conditions contribute to language dying out completely

The Nigerian policy makers know this so well but lack the political will to implement it. National Policy on Education (NPE) recognizes and recommends the indigenous languages or languages of immediate environment as languages of instruction in early or basic education. However, it made a mess of the whole policy by stating that the use of indigenous languages is dependent on the availability of teachers. Hence, the rights of Nigerian citizens to receive good and qualitative will continue to be denied as far as the education operators prove that there are no enough teachers to teach in the indigenous languages. Ezikeojiaku (2007:118) underscores the need for the educational development of indigenous Nigerian languages and stresses the

“need for the use of Nigerian language in mass scientific education ... because the number of those literate in the English language will continue to be negligible in the society, the development of the indigenous language is imperative.... A traditional medical doctor who has attended only adult education classes can write a traditional medical treatise in his local language, a task that will be impossible for him to accomplish in a foreign language.

The same applies to all locally skilled people in various areas of specializations. There is the need for capacity building towards enhancing the indigenous language skills of the Adult educators who will be specially prepared for teaching and enlighten the rural dwellers or unschooled adults in skills acquisition, skills enhancement and other relevant skills needed for their entrepreneurial development and subsequent utilization for economic transformation of the country. We have to look towards the rural populace and the unschooled who have a lot of traditional skills in areas of medicine, agriculture, technology, arts/crafts, cookery e.t.c to harness and showcase them both to Nigeria and the rest of the world. The searchlight should beam towards their local expertise and ingenuity for national economic development. These folks have to be educated and trained in their various skills through their indigenous languages to make them relevant in the global village that is fast enclosing us all.

3.0 Indigenous languages needs for specific purposes

The imperativeness for the capacity building of the indigenous Nigerian languages calls for the needs analysis of these languages for specific purposes. This is obviously in line with the concept of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) whereby researches are made towards identifying the language teaching needs of a particular set of individuals determined by what they actually need the language for. If these researches are well carried out in the indigenous languages within Nigeria, we can then begin to discuss in terms of Hausa for Specific Purposes (HSP), Igbo for Specific Purposes (ISP), Yoruba for Specific Purposes (YSP) Bini For Specific Purposes (BSP) Tiv for Specific Purposes (TSP), e.t.c. On the long run, we shall have different indigenous language teaching modules for different areas of language needs. And of course, we shall have modules that would take care of the indigenous language needs of the rural entrepreneurs which may include language to train others, language to package and market products, language to document research and development, language to develop manuals and prescriptions, language to develop teaching and production aide resources such as general books and text books. We are tired of citing successes in this kind of venture from the Asian tigers prominent among them, China, where all documentation and training are done in Chinese. It is high time we looked inward and start doing our own the right way in favour of Nigerian indigenous languages.

Uguru (2007) makes a clarion call to linguists to develop through practical language projects in the Nigerian indigenous languages in order to harness and tap the abundant technological skills and resources that abound with indigenous experts. Ezikeojiaku (2007) outlines various efforts by scholars and agencies at developing Nigerian indigenous languages through the metalanguage projects which is quite promising. However, these projects have to be translated to the rural populace and made relevant to the skilled entrepreneurs to properly harness their potentials.

4.0 Conclusion

The proper education and harnessing of the rural and unschooled skilled masses using the medium of the indigenous languages best understood and known to these folks is bound to yield tremendous results towards national economic transformation that will put Nigeria at a vantage economic position globally. For the project to be successful and yield the expected result, it must be done in the indigenous languages as these skills that are expected to be tapped and harnessed lie mostly within the unschooled populace. Most countries in Asia, especially China encourage and make proper and adequate arrangements for the use of indigenous languages in their pedagogic and scientific/ industrial ventures. They have several cottage and home based factories

Scattered all over their countries whose language of operation, training, distribution and marketing is the

indigenous language.

In line with this, all stakeholders in Nigeria should form a synergy towards capacity building in the Nigerian indigenous languages for harnessing the enormous entrepreneurial potentials in all the nooks and crannies of Nigeria especially in the rural areas and among the unschooled regardless of their area of domicile. This can effectively be done when we identify the language needs of the entrepreneurs as well as the indigenous language needs of the adult educators that would be deployed in this programme. The language needs evaluation will provide adequate data for input into the preparation of curriculum and training modules for entrepreneurial development in the indigenous languages.

Besides, for an effective mobilization of the rural dwellers and the unschooled, in this regard there is the need to make conscious and deliberate effort to reach out to them in the indigenous languages. Hence, the urgent need for the development of the indigenous languages to meet up with this kind of purpose. Several similar efforts at developing indigenous languages in the past may need to be brought together to work for this initiative.

5.0 Recommendations

There is need to recognize the language rights of local/rural entrepreneurs and develop them in their native languages and not to impose an extraneous language on them without their consent.

Such linguistic rights will include the right to be educated and trained in their various vocations using their native languages, access to documents and manuals relevant to the trades and crafts in their native languages, access and participation in community and national discourse in their native languages. The relevant government agencies and NGOs involved in mass literacy programmes should collaborate with linguists and other academics to produce modules and curriculum to educate and train the entrepreneurs in their various trades and businesses using the indigenous languages as the medium.

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