

The Place of Indigenous Nigerian Languages in National Development

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Abstract

Nigeria is the most multilingual nation in Africa with about 400 to 500 indigenous languages, which have various status - developed, developing, and underdeveloped (Emenanjo 1993:3, Aziza 1998:257). Language has been identified as a conduit for transmission of culture, idea, thought, etc. from one generation to another. The work recognizes that 54 years after independence that English (the ex- colonial masters' language) is still the language of education, governance, commerce, judiciary, etc. in Nigeria and as such has hindered equal participation of the entire citizenry in governance, access to information and full involvement in government policies and programs. The paper is a critical appraisal of the role of language in national development. Granted is the fact that knowledge and use of English provides access to trading in the global market and access to the world of science and technology; the work recognizes the place of the indigenous languages and therefore solicits that deliberate efforts should put for the empowerment of the indigenous languages to meet up with the technological drive of the 21st century and beyond. The work is a call on government, stakeholders, and individuals to put effort towards forestalling exclusion of a representative population, language endangerment and possible extinction of the indigenous languages; this can be achieved through vigorous and regular language preservation and maintenance programmes. A lost language is a lost identity and that amount to a lost race and generation.

Keywords: Language, Indigenous language. National Development

1. Introduction

Language is a conduit for transmission of people's culture, norms, ideas and belief. The repository of a people's identity and way of life is encapsulated in their language as well as transferred to other people and newer generations, via the means of language. This therefore posits that a lost language is a lost identity as well as a lost race and people. It is a key that is capable of bringing about the development of a people. The development can come in form of economic, political, educational development, technological development, social development etc. All of these developments are initiated, executed, conveyed and archived by means of language.

Eyisi (2000) notes that every conceivable human activity revolves around language. According to her; we use language to express love, hatred, anger, happiness, praise, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, to comment on the political, social, educational or economic situations in the country; to confirm or express religious beliefs, to comment on the weather and even to fill a vacuum when there is nothing else to do especially in the exchange of pleasantries. Human beings, therefore, are naturally endowed with the tendency to always talk, to use words, to employ language for a mutual social relationship with their fellow individuals and for the achievement of their daily objectives for their well-being and for the well-being of their community. People get on well when their communication flow. The same way, if there is no proper communication, activities in a given community would definitely crumble. One wonders what the world would have been without language. Language lives and dwells with the people, and the perception of the real world is construed by the language habit of the people or group of speakers. In his word, Sapir (1929; 234) succinctly opine that "we see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habit of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation". Sapir – Whorf hypothesis draws a cursory link between language and culture (ethnicity), of which an individual or group represent the culture via linguistic resources. This is one of the pivotal roles of language.

Language is one of the indispensable resources of man, necessary for his day to day transaction and activities. This situates language as a pivotal resource for meeting the communicative needs of the members of the society. Every human language is sophisticated and highly developed to meet the need of the community of speakers that use it, Stock and Windowson (1974). In the words of Lewis quoted in Algeo, (1974):

The gift of language is the single human trait that marks us all, genetically setting us apart from the rest of life. Language is, like nest building or hive making, the universal and biologically specific activity of human beings. We engage in it communally, compulsively, and automatically. We cannot be human without it; if we were to be separated from it our minds would die assuredly as bees lost from the hive.

Language makes us human; it is inseparable from the users (society). It does not exist in vacuum but lives in the lips of the speakers (language is used to meet one of the basic daily needs of the speakers. Language plays varied

functions ranging from phatic communion, assertives, declaratives, commissive and referential functions. Of key interest in this paper is the referential role of language. A Language used for referential purpose is only meant to convey or pass on information.

The functional characteristics of language are not just limited to communication or transfer of information; language also provides means of concealing information as well as unraveling hidden agendas and codes. In this situation, specific types of language or codes are utilized. The information in this case is hidden from the vast majority; while only a privileged few have access to the information.

Language also provides means of accessing our thoughts. It provides a means of showing social relations, coding, and decoding; recoding and recording information. This can be done by text (written) or talk (verbal or oral channel). The main thrust of this paper is to examine the place of language in national development.

2. Development

Development is the bane of our present world. The concept of development in prickly and has attracted varied debates by scholars. However, there seem to be a consensus that runs in this varied opinion and this has to do with complete transformation of areas like language, economics, culture, social, political, scientific, technological, educational progresses of a system or a particular society in order to meet its present need. To this end we make bold to say that development has to do with constant and consistent growth in this aspect of human life or social well-being. Topadro and Smith (2011) see development as the process of improving the quality of all human lives and capability by raising people's standard of living, self-esteem and freedom.

The term development has a number of interpretations in different concepts, however, in this paper, our idea of development falls in line with the view of Oyeleran (1988), who construes development from human affairs standpoint. To him development implies; "The conscious promotion of the well-being and security of persons in such a way that is constantly able to optimize the realization of their individual potentials". This view is similar to the one expressed by Adediji (1992), that development is a "constant and appreciable amelioration in economic, social, technological, political and cultural aspect of life of a people". Our interest in adopting the above concepts is not only because they are in line with the objectives of this paper but because they are also in line with Lado, (1964) that; "Language is intimately tied to man's feelings and activity, it is bound up with nationality, religion, and the feelings of self. It is used for work, worship and play by everyone" Language provides a conduit, repository, and means of transmission, expression and communication of economic belief, socio political, educational and political trajectory of the people / society. This therefore situates that a successful transformation of the society can only be achieved through the use of the indigenous language of the people. The work seeks to answer the question on why indigenous languages are crucial component in national development.

3. The Linguistic Design of Nigeria

Nigeria, next to the Island of New Guinea, is linguistically the richest country in the world with over 500 indigenous languages. This situates the country as one of the linguistically diverse nations of the world. Out of the existing indigenous languages, three are regarded as national languages- Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba (ordering is alphabetical not necessarily due to the number of speakers, preference, dominance or importance). The status of these three languages as major/ official languages is captured in the national policy of education formulated in 1977 and revised subsequently in 1981, 1989, 1998 and 2004). The Nigerian Language Policy (hereinafter NLP) is a principled statement of the Federal Government of Nigeria, which has statutory flavour, guiding the teaching, learning and official use of different languages in the country. The policy stresses the importance of language national development and also a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion, as well as preserving the nation's rich cultural heritage.

Adekunle (1976) examined the functionality of Nigerian languages and classified them into three categories as outlined below;

Class A

In this category, the Languages are classified by the government as the major indigenous languages; and they are spoken by at least six million native speakers and used widely outside their state of origin by Nigerians with different mother tongues, Examples of this are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba

Class B these are officially recognized languages in Nigeria and used at the national level as and federal level but do not enjoy much usage outside the state of their origin . Under this category are; Kanuri, Fulani, Edo, Efik, Tiv, and Ijo, etc.

Class C these are minor languages with no official recognition at the state level.

Adekunle's classification seem to align with stand of the government on the status of Nigerian languages and the official recognition of the class a languages- Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba by the National Policy on Education (1979) as a means of conducting business in the National Assembly alongside English. These policies exists in papers but are not applicable, this is due to the linguistic diversity of the Nigerian nation and people. This has

hindered the development of Nigerian indigenous languages, but has rather favored the growth of English language which has gained more prestige and status in Nigeria.

4. The Status of English Language in Nigeria

Knowledge and proficiency in English is a requirement for assessing white collar job, transaction of official functions. They have been serious national debate on the use of foreign languages in conducting official matters in Nigeria. The fans on the use of English as a lingua franca feel that there is nothing wrong in the use of English since it is the language understood and used by the vast majority of the educated class and considering its place as a global language needed to trade and market in the globalized world of today. Even with the insertion on the National Policy on Education and the Nigerian constitution, English is still the means of running the day today official business in government offices, legislative and judiciary in Nigeria. This triggered lots of debate by some scholars on the predatory role of English and the indigenous languages which has been relegated to the background.

The dignified position of English in the development of Nigeria has in turn downgraded the indigenous languages to the background and as well made less significance in the scheme of things in the country. The implication of this is that if conscious effort is not made to redress this situation, in the near future Nigeria may lose its linguistic identity.

Emenanjo and Bleambo (1990) wrote that "Language is an invaluable instrument for communication. As a means of communication, language thrives on use. If language is in use it is alive, vibrant, dynamic, grows and survives. But if a language is not used by its indigenous speakers then its continuous survival is threatened". Human language, when it is indigenous has been described as the most effective means of communication (UNESCO 1911) when people talk or converse they are simply manifesting language.

5. Nature and Function of Language

This concept has attracted the patronage of scholars. Central to our extrapolation are the views of Ferdinand de Saussure (1916/1995) that language is a system of signs. It is a system of encoding meaning and realities of the world. Of a similar interest to this work is also the Sapir- Whorf hypothesis which posits that,

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation (Sapir 1929).

From the foregoing, every language is unique for the expression of the culture of its speakers. It is culture specific and adequate in conveying the world of its speakers. The essence of man is being able to communicate with one's environment. Language is used for creativity, education, music, integration, expression of emotion and establishment and dissolution of relationship. National development has been measured assessed with the parameter such as improved agricultural production, commerce and industrial, establishment and sustenance of international relationship etc.

6. Conceptualizing the Role of Language in National Development

Language study and the use of linguistic resources is fast becoming a discipline that has attracted the attention of various scholars from various disciplines. The patronage could be attributed to the fact that language encapsulates the people's culture, tradition, identity, custom, ideology of a people. Some roles of a language in national development include; nationalism, national integration, technological advancement, African indigenous language are central to African development. A nation is best developed by the way the language that best portrays its ideology is used; that language serves as a medium for expression of the entity it represents. A language that performs such function is called a national language.

The role of language in national development has been a controversial issue especially in language planning especially on issues of language planning theories (Ndukwe 1988:114). A viable language planning is one that ensures maximum participation of all the citizenry with regards to the various sectors of development.

The linguistic heterogeneity of Nigeria compels the adoption of English as a language for integration, education, governance and commerce in Nigeria. Agbedo (2000:196) notes that "The essential strands of argument point somewhat gloomily to the fact that Nigeria's timid language policy and the blind glorification of English language by the ruling class have conspired to undermine the local language and rob them of their utilitarian values in the important national development drive the tenacious grip on the colonial master's language has

incarcerated the vast majority of the Nigerian population from participating in the overall national development in the country". This is a call for an operative national language policy in Nigeria that has the tendency of being utilized in education, diplomacy, cohesion, conflict management and resolution, peace- building, and agricultural purposes.

a. Communicating national development via Indigenous languages

Nation development is not a sole property of individual, but a group of individual can converse to formulate strategies for the development of the nation. This formulated national development from a few individual is usually conveyed to the entire populace via linguistic resources. So language provides a tool for the conveyance of national development.

b. Documenting national development via Indigenous languages

Edward and Sienkewicz (1990), in observing the importance of language in documenting national development, cites Mamadou Kouyate, thus: "We are vessels of speech, we are the repositories which harbor secrets many centuries old... We are memory of mankind; by the spoken word we bring to life the deeds and exploits of kings for younger generations".

Documentation is a tool for preservation of various facets of human ideas, achievement and ideologies. These preserved resources can only be transferred from one generation to another via language. Language holds the power to maintain national and cultural identity.

Egbokhare, Francis (2009) captures the importance of Language is in ethnic and national sentiments, noting that because of its powerful and visible symbolism; it becomes a core symbol or rallying point. He x-rayed the impact of language as a symbol of national identity from the perspective of the history of the Basques, an ethnic group in the North of Spain. In 1937 to mid-1950s, the Spanish government made desperate attempts to destroy the Basque culture and forbade the use of the Basque language. Books written in the language were burnt publicly and Basque names in official documents were translated into Spanish. All Basque names in, and inscriptions on public buildings and tombstones were removed, and their indigenous names were forbidden to be used in baptism ceremonies. This is a deliberate attempt to kill a language.

The intrinsic relationship existing between language and cultural identity makes it pivotal for any government to take steps to limit the predatory influence of foreign languages on the indigenous languages. Iran for instance has banned companies from using Western names. Also in Costa Rica, a new law was enacted that controls the use of foreign languages and even imposes fines on those who break it. Under the law, companies that advertise their products and services in a foreign language must also include a Spanish translation in bold letters. This is a move by government to preserve linguistic decadence in the society.

It is rather disheartening that in the quest for solution to development issues in Africa, scholars tend to ignore the place of language and socio-cultural resources in national development. The linguistic diversity of the continent has often been seen as part of the deterrents to the development of Africa. It is the conduit for conveyance / transfer and transmission of findings, theories to the grass-root or users of the theories and principles. The interest of most scholars on issues of national development has been narrowed mainly to the economic sector by the calculation of income per capital and other socio-economic concepts. This has that any expression of African culture and ideology. This is an erroneous misconception. This group of people believes that scientific language like English and France should better be used for the expression and representation of scientific concepts, theories, and ideas. This they attribute to the inadequacies of the indigenous languages to express some scientific or technological ideas or adequate expression of political notion.

This paper appreciates the role of English language in the integration of Nigeria but as well argues that English language is not adequate in the expression of all developmental ideologies. It argues that certain developmental concept cannot be adequately expressed, conveyed and implemented without the application of our indigenous language.

Conclusion

The role of language in human society is indispensable. It provides means for social function, management and organization. Development is the sustainable economic, political, socio-culture and technological transformation of a society and language on the other hand provides the means of conveying the developmental paradigm to the society. Language therefore serves as a catalyst in national development. The use of indigenous languages is central to the holistic development of any nation. It is imperative to take the linguistic features into account in order to ensure full participation all the citizenry in the developmental process. For this to happen there is need for effective communication in indigenous languages. This is because the use of foreign languages will impede full participation of the citizenry especially at the grassroots level. The Nigerian Minister of State for Education, Chief Nyesom Wike, had lamented that Nigeria's adult illiterates have increased from 25 million in 1997 to 35 million in 2013. That being the case, Nigeria has a population of over 50% who cannot read and write in English which is the language of education. To ensure full and equal participation of all citizenry in all sectors of the country, there is need for understanding of concepts conveyed and not only that but also to express themselves using their indigenous language thereby contributing their quota to the development of the country. The use of

indigenous languages is pivotal for agricultural, technological, social, political, economic and scientific advancement. It is not just enough to formulate policies and programmes, it is of more importance to be able to transfer and interpret such policies, finding and technology to the end users ; and also to ensure that they understand what is being transmitted to avoid misunderstanding the information,. Unfortunately not all the population is educated. If this must be done, then there is need to use the indigenous languages for transfer and transmission of such.

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