
LANGUAGE AS A POTENT TOOL FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF NIGERIA'S INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

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ABSTRACT

Language, considered in the dynamic function of its diverse roles in human existence, can also be viewed as a catalyst for the growth of human society. Where most especially people with different linguistic background proclaim towards common goals to form bonds as a nation, the growth of such nation will inextricably be predicated on the utilization of the different languages in the development plans known as nation building. Nation building in the wider sense of its definition, goes beyond mere physical structures, and as an aggregate of human society, the optimum justifiable potency of indigenous languages in this Endeavour cannot be overemphasized. Thus, as a mark of its wide role in society, this paper seeks to consider the various indigenous languages towards achieving national development.

INTRODUCTION

Languages is an important paradigm for achieving national development. This comes in view of the conception that development, in all its ramifications is considered from a cultural milieu which is attainable only through the sustainability of language. Thus, while development in the strictest sense can be referred to as the realization of human potential, language conversely can be seen as the ability, system, mode of expression of thought, felling and desires. This means that language interacts with every other aspect of human thought. Given this, we can say that there is an active interplay between language and national development. This realization of ideas into thought is achievable only in cooperation between social groups. Nigeria is a heterogeneous multi-lingual society and as it is usual with such societies, there is normally a case of linguistic hostility, predicted on the fear of dominance (Language colonialism) or extinction (Linguistic assimilation). Nigeria has her own fair share of these linguistics problems. That is why one talks of language dominance among the so-called three major languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba). These three languages no doubt have an overbearing influence on the other languages in the surrounding environment. Even the Federal Government has acknowledged this dominance, as it is stated in the nation's language policy. Nevertheless, we cannot forget about the countless other languages, which are fully developed and have linguistic independence. The concept of "three major" being a purely political one rather than true linguistic hegemony. The fact therefore is that each language group that enjoys a linguistic population or patronage has a role to play and even crucially, if we are to achieve over all national development, were every group must participate. Thus cast in this perspective, we can agree that language form and function is stratified; where various participatory roles are inevitably arranged to different languages. Bamgbose (14) puts it this way:

The three major languages in the country have major roles to play in the country's integration. In the second tier, as it were, are the languages which can be recognized as state languages (...) on the third level are the other languages which have various roles (...)

From Bamgbose's submission can be seen the essential role of language, cast in the epistemological role of its diverse functions in the attainment and sustenance of over all national development objectives. The then Soviet Union, being a multilingual society with heterogeneous groups had such policy. Russia was given endorsement as the official language; however the other languages were allowed participatory statues in the performance of other equally important national roles, particularly in education. It is an incontestable fact that meaningful national development can be achieved through only effective mass participation. This can be achieved through the dynamic force of ethical awareness, mobilization, conscientization that has its base at the grassroots. Suffice to mention here that these ideas are attainable only though the effective use of local languages, primarily for information dissemination and awareness campaigns. A pointer to the fact of this statement is the recognition and usage of Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba on national network services as well Tiv, Nupe, Igala, Fulfude, among others spread on the other networks in regional headquarters for awareness programmes. Nigeria has a greater percentage of her population who are illiterate. These are people who have no access to Western education. However, in the contemporary wake of democracy and man participation, it entails that this literate population must be carried along the act of governance. This is achievable through awareness and mobilization, using the language of the locality, immediately comprehensible to these local populace.

Impact in National Development through Indigenous Languages

In the widest and unrestricted sense of its application, national development is conceived as development that is encompassing; in the sense of its outreach capacity and also in terms of its full dynamics. For the attentions of this paper, we shall be examining the contributions of indigenous languages in this regard (growth) via Education, Health, Economy, Democracy, and national unity. The Federal government of Nigeria, on recognizing the importance of Nigeria's indigenous languages make the following pronouncement contained in (NPE:4):

Government appreciates the importance of language as a means promoting social interaction and national cohesion; and preserving culture.

Accordingly, government promulgates that the language of instruction should be "language of the immediate environment" citing further.

The medium of instruction in the primary schools shall be language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject.

This pronouncement, though only on paper, is in recognition of the fact that government is of the opinion that a child's formative years are very important and the development

imprint made on the child's psyche could determine for life such child's value or subsequent contribution towards the development of his country. Education in the mother tongue will therefore create more meaning, and make the world more real to the child, thereby facilitate his learning process. According to Elugbe (14):

Once we accept that education is part , if not the corner stone of national development, it will become obvious that Nigerian languages have to be developed so that education may be on a surer footing.

He goes on to say that even the concept of "transfer of technology will be possible only if the children are taught in the mother tongues those concepts as they would understand them". Towards this end, it becomes obvious that Nigerian languages have an important role to play in national development. Another area where without doubt the optimum potency of indigenous languages can be justified is in the area of health. Health is the wealth of any nation. In spite of this, there are serious health issues, which have assumed global dimension. The HIV/AIDS scourge is one of such issues. Besides that, one hears of other deadly health issues like the ebola virus, mad cow disease, ravaging parts of Europe and till recently America. These health issues have global dimensions, which scientists all over the world are furiously researching for solutions. But when the solution is far reached like in the case HIV/AIDS, the only option left is prevention. This means mass campaigns for awareness would be guaranteed. In this regard, jingles, adverts and all other forms of AIDS education have to be carried out, including drama and pep shows, talks, using the indigenous languages. Equally, the issue of vaccination and its mobilization efforts is another factors. Recently, there have been protests and resistance among a section of the Northern population in Nigeria over immunizations, with these groups making spurious claims that sprang from lack of awareness. It is the contention of this paper that if proper awareness campaigns are launched towards a targeted audience, using the indigenous languages, then the awareness created in this regard will be genuine and also beneficial, subsequently doing away with suspicion. It is noteworthy of mention that efforts are in this regard, though much more could still be done, one can now hear jingles or adverts in the local languages. We will call on government to step up more efforts in this regard. Democracy, if practiced in the indigenous languages will also enhance national development. This will come in the realm of mass literacy; government attempts to reach out to the general populace, and the quickest way to do this is through the indigenous languages. This is creating meaning and explaining development concepts to people languages that could create lasting meaning to them. This creates empowerment and a feeling of belonging since everyone has a hand in the decision making process. According to Elugbe (14):

In terms of mass participation in government there is a good case for developing our national languages; democracy, which is our goal cannot truly exist where only an elitist few can participate.

In this regard, Kellman (1971) is of the opinion that nobody will be left out of the development process. This implies that a feeling of not being left out increases the zeal of belonging and thereby participation. Closely tied to the issue of democracy practiced in

indigenous languages is national unity; because a vast majority of the languages, if developed will leave no group out in the development process. This erases mutual distrust and suspicious, but strengthens the bonds of unity. In the economic sector, there is a model for human development that is predicated on the development of indigenous languages. The assumption here hinges on the fact that development activities such as mass literacy awareness campaigns and mass participation are catalysts to a vibrant economy. It is believed that the dynamic complexities of this awareness create a bond and purpose towards self-sustenance and sufficiency. There is increased contact; most especially where individuals are encouraged to learn languages of their immediate environment.

Strategies for Enhancement

As a step forward, the concept of linguistic minority being a pseudo-scientific concept should be forestalled. This is because it is interwoven with other non-linguistic factors like ethnicity and socio-economic status. Once this is eliminated, government could be seen to openly encourage, promote and create a feeling of belonging in the speakers of these minority languages. Because of the inextricable ties language and its usage has with other social variables, some speakers, especially among the so called minorities prefer to put aside their languages for their dominant one in order to seek prestige in using the so called majority languages. This can be seen in the language habits of tribes around the central north area of Nigeria like have preference for Hausa, just for the sake of social prestige. In consideration of the educational and social development of the nation, there should be, according to (Ndukwe 18) "stimulated intensive research and compensatory programmes". This task rests squarely on the shoulders of the government most especially for languages that have defined functional roles. This will come in by way of language engineering, which in turn facilitates and accommodates transfer of technology through the indigenous languages. Government should make categorical policy statements and adopts concrete strategies towards their sustained implementation. What obtains presently in the country is just an arbitrary socio-linguistic classification. There are no clearly defined parameters upon which language policy issues are discussed. A cursory examination of the present policy statement will suffice. The case of English language, which maintains an official unofficial status after so many years, is still in question. Next is the aspect of an indigenous language for a national language, as well as the delineation between the so-called majority/minority languages, and lastly a policy pronouncement concerning the multiplicity of those other indigenous languages. What is required in this regard, on the part of the government it to evolve a proper language policy, taking into consideration the indices for national development; engage experts in language planning and development, engage in massive, sustained long-term language development. This is in the light of Amayo's (1983) opinion that the life span of a nation is supposed to be eternity. In further regards to this, government should make a classification of the various roles languages should play in the scheme of affairs. In this regard, while it will be possible to have some languages function on official capacity, others could function as languages of instruction in the primary school as being prescribed by the National Policy on Education, and yet other could still function at the level of mobilization and awareness campaign where the National Orientation Agency (NOA) will be charged with the responsibility of creating awareness on some of

those sensitive issues in the indigenous languages. Language policy, just like implementation and planning need not be borrowed from any country. It should be adopted based on peculiar needs. In this regard, Nigeria's Socio-linguistic development needs should be the prime consideration here; Bamgbose (15) no less agrees with this where he says:

In fact some of the successful decision in the involvement of African languages in national development such as in Somalia and Tanzania have been taken under peculiar and not definitely Western style governments.

CONCLUSION

Language no doubt plays a vital role in human development. Nigeria cannot therefore be an exception in achieving this growth via language. Her multi-lingual nature notwithstanding, the ideological consideration that many languages create disunity should be discountenanced; rather it is the neglect of some of these languages and the subsequent elevation of some over others that create disunity. This paper is of the opinion that Nigerian can achieve faster growth and national development through the use of her indigenous languages, the facts of the matter being that where there is participatory role play by these indigenous languages and their speakers, then development would be fostered. Again, there are certain global issues of alarming dimensions that need to be tackled urgently. In this regard, mobilization and awareness campaigns need to be carried out. This could be effectively achieved if indigenous languages are engaged in this regard. Also, the Federal Government should design programmes that would sustain the growth of indigenous languages and depoliticization of language issues. Policy statements on issues of planning, development and growth should be backed up with implementation. With this, will be the satisfaction that at least indigenous languages in Nigerian have shared roles in the nation's growth.

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