LANGUAGE AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Some observers have predicted that the fifty years old Nigerian Federation may witness another civil war if the grievances of some ethnic groups are not properly addressed and in good time. This prediction is based upon the existence of the common centrifugal tendencies manifest in the forms of ethno-political, ethno-religious and militant or youths' crises and conflicts in the federation. This paper is, however, not interested in assessing the veracity or otherwise another civil war prediction, rather it is concerned with the option of language as an important instrument that can be used to manage if not eradicate the various crises and conflicts that exits in Nigeria. To this end the paper takes a look at what language is and its importance in the society, how language affects the society in various ways, i. e. language in social context. It also treats the language situation in a multilingual Nigerian as well as aspects of meaning to show how language works in a society and lastly the use of language as an instrument for conflict management.

Introduction

In the relationship among men, boundary disputes, drive for Political domination, inequality in disbursement of human and natural resources and marginalization feature repeatedly. Survival of human groups therefore forms the crux of nation, nation-states, countries, empires etc. Man, according to Ekoko (2005:3) encounters a boundary, border, a frontier or even border regions or zones. He becomes entangled with the protection, preservation, extension and consolidation of frontiers, which in both African and World history has always changed with time.

The dynamics of history, according to Ekoko, such as migrations, trade, wars, revolutions and other forms of inter-group and inter-territorial communication continued to militate against inflexibility and that the pre-colonial Africa suggests a rejection of the concepts of the frontier in a sense of a line which indicates fixed limits of a given political unit. This clearly demonstrates that in pre-colonial Africa defined boundaries were not rigidly held on to. Nigeria is not an exception.

Africans were left in constant conflict over the struggle to take dominance over the political, economic and territorial sphere of neighbours. Using Nigeria as a case study we shall attempt the option of language as a veritable measure for dousing the spate of those incessant conflicts, so that people can live in conflict free Nation.

Language

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines as a system of communication by written or spoken words, which is used by the people of a particular area or country. Language therefore is a system for the expression of thoughts, feelings. This is the faculty which distinguishes man from other animals. Language therefore could be simply described as communication with understanding arising from common background and values. It is a common heredity of people.

Language is the pivot on which all human activities, ranging from the most prosaic to the most profound, resolve. As an exclusively human activity, the seemingly inexhaustible potentials of language are continually exploited by man for business transactions, exchanging ideas, feelings as well as discussing and explaining

issues. Language provides the unique medium through which the belief system, world-view, moral values and virtually all the basic ingredients of any given society are passed on from generation to generation. The essential thread that runs through all these activities is communication. That is, speakers trying to exchange their ideas. Language as a natural ability is common to every normal human being. In other words, all human being are naturally disposed to using language for the sole purpose of communication. The common place nature of language has tended to diminish the obvious mystery surrounding it. Given the steak smoothness and effortless ease with which people use language for communication, the tendency has been to think that there is nothing mysterious about language and therefore nothing about language to explain. According to Agbedo, C. U. (2003) Chomsky captures this situation vividly when he observes that "as native speakers, we have a vast amount of data available to us. For this reason, it is easy to fall into the trap of believing that there is nothing to be explained. Nothing could be further from the truth...."

In Nigeria, Igbo is a language spoken by Ndi Igbo. Yoruba language is spoken by Yoruba people while Hausa language is spoken by Hausa people. These are the officially adopted main languages of the federal Republic of Nigeria. About 300 other languages are spoken by communities spread throughout the length and breadth of the densely populated Nigeria.

Language in Social Context:

Language is necessary to society as society is necessary to language. There can be no study of language devoid of society. In the study of language, social and cultural consideration are required, nevertheless, language is essentially social in nature. A very good knowledge of our society will enable us to predict with some level of reliability the probability of certain types of languages being used in a given particular situation, and given the language, we can also predict, with certainty the social situations out of which it came to be.

However, one wonders if a language can exist without people. It is equally doubtful if a person, no matter his/her intelligence, can speak without a listener.

The study of language as part of culture and society is called sociolinguistics. Before now it has been seen in different perspectives and called several names over the years. Such names include "sociology of language", social linguistics", "sociological linguistics", "anthropological linguistics", "ethnography of communication", ethnolinguistics and sociolinguistics.

Osuagu et al (1997) define sociolinguistics as the study of the variation of language in the light of non-linguistic aspects of social structure. It is, specifically, the relationship between grammatical choices and social functions and situations and the individual's knowledge of his language varieties and the role he performs with them. Sociolinguistics also includes the study of the ways language determines other social behaviour of people. Eastman and Long year as quoted in Osuagu et al (1997) in their own view define sociolinguistics as the study of patterns and variation in language within a society or community. It focuses on the way people use language to express social class, group status, gender, or ethnicity and it looks at how they make choices about the form of language they use. It also examines the way people use language to negotiate their roles in society and to achieve positions of power. For example, sociolinguistics studies have found that the way a New Yorker pronounces the phoneme, in an expression such as "fourth floor" can indicate the person's social class. According to Eastman and Long year, people aspiring to move from the lower middle class to the upper middle class attach prestige to the pronunciation of *III*. Sometimes they even over correct their speech, pronouncing /r/ where those whom they wish to copy may not.

Some sociolinguists believe that analyzing such variables as the use of a particular phoneme can predict the direction of language change. Change, they say, moves towards the variable associated with power, prestige or other quality having "high class value".

Other sociolinguists focus on what happens when speakers of different languages interact. This approach to language change emphasizes the way language mix rather than the directions of change within a community. The goal of sociolinguists is to understand communicative competence - what people need to know to use the

appropriate language for a given social setting.

Usually in any given speech community, which is either monolingual/monocultural or multilingual/multicultural, there are two forces operating simultaneously. Adekunle (1990) as quoted in Agbedo, C. U. (2007) identifies them as centrifugal and centripetal forces. The centrifugal force or tendency towards ethnic, sectional and regional solidarity or unity and centripetal force or tendency towards national solidarity and national cultural identity; both, of which tend to be continuously locked in constant struggle for supremacy over each other. In situation where the centripetal force gains the upper hand both linguistically and culturally, the movement would be towards national character. The second situation obtains in Nigeria, where ethnic loyalty and language loyalty are strong due to the fact that the centrifugal forces or tendency towards regional ethnic solidarity had been well entrenched before the more recent centripetal forces, the incipient national solidarity idea, more evident the national administrative capitals came to the scene. Even in the cities and capitals, which are disposed to being melting pots of cultural types, the pattern of life tend to imbue the centrifugal force with more divisive vigour and potency, which pales into insignificance the centripetal force: The endemic problem in such multilingual setting as Nigeria is mainly that of forging a core cultural consensus with a language or languages of expression that would make way for national solidarity, national integration and unity.

Aspects of Meaning:

We have defined language earlier as a system of conventionalized symbols by which human being: communicate with each other or among themselves. Every language has its own semantic structure, just as it has it's own syntactic and phonological structure and every competent speaker of a language has mastered the language and can produce and understand individual words and sentences of that language effortlessly as well as interpret and categorise meanings. Interpreting the meaning of a word or sentence is, therefore, part of the linguistic knowledge possessed by a speaker. According to Stern (1991:343), "the native speaker has an intuitive grasp of the linguistic, cognitive, affective and socio-cultural meanings expressed by language form".

The implication of the above statement by Stern is that as a native speaker, we can relate different sentence patterns to their underlying meanings. We can understand semantic equivalent of two or more different sentences In other words, we can keep an underlying meaning constant while changing the surface sentence structure. We can have lexical and syntactic ambiguities and assign two different underlying meaning to the same (or similar surface structures. This ability shows that as human beings we can possess vocabulary and recognize its pronunciation by other speakers. In other words, we often depend on meaning to get our messages across to others. Commercial organizations, for instance, spend a lot of money and effort on naming products, devising slogans and creating messages that will be meaningful to the buying public.

Furthermore, the truth of the matter is that linguists have always used meaning in one way or the other, in their studies of philosophy, morphology and syntax. The difficulty is to decide what kind of meaning they have been using and whether their use of it has been legitimate. Fied, E. R. (1993) refers to lexical meaning, structural meaning and social meaning as kinds of meaning. The first two combines with social meaning to give us total meaning. In ordinary language we can tell lies, we can use language to persuade people, to excite, entertain or frightened people, and we regularly make use of the many figures of speech hyperbole, metaphor, etc. There are obviously other factors involved in getting the message across. Often, indeed, the intended message seems quiet unrelated to the linguistic form.

Language Situation in Nigeria:

Prior to the British imperialist incursion, what came to be known as Nigeria was a collection of many people with different linguistic, social and political customs inhabiting contiguous territories for the past thousands of years. The number of ethno-linguistic groups that make up Nigeria is grossly indeterminate due mainly to lack of consensus on what criteria to use in determining an ethnic group do not necessarily seen to coincide. The figure, 400 for the ethno-linguistic groups in Nigeria seems a reasonable estimate in the light of the

significant cultural differences especially with regard to the almost inestimable number of mutually unintelligible languages.

However, in a situation where ethnic boundaries do not coincide with language boundaries, the number of languages is higher than that of ethnic units. In this regard, Iwaloye and Ibeanu (1997) as quoted in Agbedo, C. U. (2007) identify fifty-one ethnic units and over four hundred and thirty languages. Although this account is grossly subjective, the fact remains that ethnic and language units are not conterminous.

The foregoing explains the conglomeration of ethnolinguistic groups in Nigeria. In the North for instance, there are Hausa, Fulfude, Kanuri, Babu, Margi, etc; in the west are Yoruba, Edo, Esako and Owan; while in the East is Igbo as the dominant linguistic group. In the southern region, the linguistic units include Urhobo, Itsekiri, Efik, Ibibio, Annang, Kalahari, Andoni, Obolo, etc. The languages have been assigned differential functions on the basis of their regional, state and local status. The three major languages Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba perform regional or federal functions in administration, education and mass media. The state languages such as Nupe, Tiv, Edo, Ibibio, Efik, and Ijaw perform state functions while their ethnolects function in broadcasting and public enlightenment. However a realignment of function and change of status of these languages that came with the restructuring of Nigeria in terms of local councils and states from three regions in 1960 to 36 states and 774 local councils area in 1996 has tended to alter the geo-linguistic configuration of the country. As Emenanjo (1995) as cited in Agbedo (2003) observes, Nigerian languages, which hitherto had regional, local or limited significance, have now been either 'demoted' for the regional languages or 'promoted' from erstwhile local languages to state importance. A typical example, he noted is Efik in the former eastern region where in the northern and western region, respectively. With the creation of South Eastern state in 1967 and Cross River state 1976, Efik, became of high status. The fortunes of Efik, however, dwindled following the creation of Akwa-Ibom state in 1987, as Ibibio language claimed the higher status in the new state, it equally suffered what Emenanjo calls linguistic balkanization or atomism, for example, Ikwere and Echie, which were originally lets of Igbo languages, were suddenly accorded a major independent language status in Rivers state. In Delta state the three lets of Igbo, Ika, Ukwuani and Enuani (Aniocha/Oshimili) were recognized as discrete languages on their own just as Okpe, Uvwie and Ovwian lets of Urhobo are being treated as languages different from Urhobo.

The splitting of these languages represents one of such offshoots of the rise of ethnic nationalism occasioned by the state creation exercise. The independence that came with the state creation exercise created a leeway for some nationalities hitherto hemmed in by the bigger nationalities to escape from the suffocating prison of ethnolinguistic imperialism and echo the chronic drumbeat of self assertion in all aspects of their respective languages and cultures.

Conflicts:

March and Simon (1988) define conflict as the breakdown of the standard of mechanism of decision making so that individual(s) or group(s) experiences difficulty in selecting an action or alternative. Akpotor (2000) maintains that conflict is lack of cooperation between and among people. Conflict is a major phenomenon in any organization or society and an organization or society is seen as a collection of independent and interacting individuals who work towards common goals and whose relationships are determined to a certain structure. Perhaps this was why Coser (1956) defines conflict as a struggle over values and claims to scarce resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate the rivals. Nevertheless, conflict arises due to factors such as marginalization, deprivation, frustration, authoritarian leadership and nature of politics that emphasizes winner takes all character.

Ethnic tension usually results from the perception of inequitable access to resources among groups and the fear of marginalization from power, as demonstrated by the mutual destruct between the Igbo and other groups that led to the 1967-70 Biafran civil war and by the sectarian clashes between Hausa and Tivs in Nasarwa state in 2001. In reality, disparities in access to resources and policy influence are generally far more pronounced within

ethnic communities than across them.

The foregoing historical trends tend to shed light on the centrifugal elements and divisive forces lucking within the shadows of the geo-political entity called Nigeria. These factors provided the platform for other co-occurring variables that combined to sharpen ethnic sentiments and resultant crises. In view of this, certain measure were taken to avert conflict situation between 1960 and 1983, such as the adoption of federalism, fundamental rights provisions in the constitution, adoption of a multi-party system, presidentialism, modification of the electrical system, restructuring of the political parties and the setting up of National Youths services corps However, these measures could not douse the ethnic tensions as demonstrated by the rises that erupted from time to time.

According to Agbedo (2007) the first major inter-ethnic riot in the country occurred in Kano in 1953. In 1960 and 1964, riots broke out in Tiv land as a result of power struggle between the Hausa Fulani and the local Tiv elite class. The third major ethnic crisis was the 1966 pogrom directed against Ndigbo in the North that led to the civil war in 1967. The post civil-war Nigeria did not witness an end to the intermittent outbreaks of ethnic violence characterized by ethnic conspiracies, betrayals and gang ups. The 1990s marked major upsurge of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria, of particular mention are the Zango-Kataf clash of May 1992 and Jukun-Tiv clash also in 1992. Between 1999 and 2000, clashes erupted between Ife and Modakeke groups, the OPC and Hausa Fulani community in Ketu and Sagamu in Lagos state. The 4-days ethnic clashes involving the Hausa-Fulani group and OPC in October 2000 snowballed into reprisal killing in Kano and Mina. In late February 2000, religious riot gripped Kaduna, tuning the city into a killing field as ethnic champions hiding under the Charade of Islam and Christianity engaged in primordial orgy of hatred. As the destructive dust was setting, the wind of acrimony blew the ashes of ruins from Kaduna to Aba, Owerri, Umuahia and Okigwe were some (presumably Ndi Igbo) swooped on the Hausa Fulani Community to avenge the deaths of their relatives during the Kaduna mayhem. These religious crises continued till recently in Jos claiming about 160 lives in 2010.

The tide of conflict, however, has qhanged from ethnic crises to militant unrest and incessant kidnapping of political opponents and innocent citizens, envisaged from 2008 to date. This unenviable historical antecedent has tended to compound the problems of ethnicity and National integration. This raises the crucial issue of articulating enduring solutions to these problems.

Language as Instrument for Conflict Management:

Ethno - Political conflicts and electoral conflicts with the exception of a few religious conflicts have assumed ethnic or majority minority colouration. Therefore, efforts to redress conflicts have been directed more at the grievances of the minority but not much has been directed towards language as an instrument. Fishman (1977) has justified language as ethnicity's symbol par excellence by referring to it as the recorder of paternity, the expresser of patrimony and the carrier of phenomenology. Also in justifying the place of language in ethnicity, Opata (1999:33) cited in Agbedo (2007) avers that language is about the most important factor in the formation of ethnic identifies, in the delineation of ethnic identities and ethnic boundaries; that the issue of language is fundamentally central and even definatory of the ethnic problem.

In Nigeria, as in other multilingual nations, language has had the tendency of generating rancorous and acrimonious relationships between the ethnic groups. The hot controversies which National language generated at the dawn of Nigeria's independence and the fierceness with which ethno linguistic groups disagreed over language matters lent extra credence to language as a latent instrument for ethno political action.

However, with regards to the potency of ethnicity and language in providing the circumstances of various conflicts in the Nations, the task of articulating solutions for cubing ethnic crises in Nigeria cannot afford to ignore the inter-play of ethnicity and language variables. Therefore we suggest the adoption of an approach to national language policy that can exert moderating influences on the seemingly fixated actions of protest of minority groups against the current trilingual policy and discourage the tendency of seeing language as a veritable

object for fanning the embers of ethnic sentiments.

One sure step in this direction according to Agbedo (2007) is a language policy that emphasises the developmental aspect of all languages irrespective of their individual status. Such a developmental emphasis, continues Agbedo, will focus on the modernization and standardization of all local languages such that their speakers receive basic education that affords them unrestricted access to the nation's socio-economic and political dispensations and the opportunities to participate in them.

It is only when a language policy which confers linguistic empowerment to the generality of Nigerians through the instrumentality of their respective mother tongues is put in place, can it be expected that a decision to accord official status to three macro languages (Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba) will not meet with any opposition. Once the fear of holding on to the primacy of language to circumscribe to citizen's inalienable right to participate in the various spheres of national life is allayed, perhaps then Nigerians, irrespective of their ethnolinguistic backgrounds would be encourage to invest their collective hopes in the Nigerian nation.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to draw attention to the centrality of language in dousing the various kinds of conflicts that have shaken the foundation of Nigeria as a nation since her independence and the need for government of the day to streamline the national language policy in a manner that would emphasis the developmental aspect of language and guarantee language empowerment of the people.

Of noteworthy is the fact that the unenviable historical antecedent is not peculiar to Nigeria given that the ethnic factor in consonance with multilingualism has been on since the dawn of human existence as attested to by the Tower of Babel story recorded in Genesis Chapter eleven of The Bible. What is perhaps peculiar to Nigeria is that rather than accepting the reality of her diversity as an enormous potential for National greatness as other great nations of the world, like United States did, the diverse ethnic blocks in Nigeria have tended to see in their respective languages a veritable instrument for expediting ethno-political actions and generating tensions in the polity.

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The Bible.