

## LANGUAGE: A PANACEA FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL MOBILISATION IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the role of language as a tool for National development and Social mobilisation in Nigeria. It acknowledges the peculiarities of the pluralistic nature of African languages and opined that with effective language policy, the abundant linguistic resources could engender sustainable National development. To a reasonable extent, language could carry the masses along with the happenings in the society. English, pidgin and local languages performing needed functions in the society especially through mass media, social mobilisation becomes a success. The paper also views the media as a fertile ground where languages could be planted in order to produce the needed information persuasion and public relations that can motivate and mobilise the people to the positive direction.*

**Key words:** language Education, National Development, Social Development, media, multilingualism, pidgin, mother tongue.

### Introduction

The importance of language and communication is incalculable and priceless, especially when daily human interaction and education is considered. The roles played by language in nation building may not be immediately clear to a casual observer but the truth is that language is related to both democracy and free society that it can contribute greatly in building a free and democratic society. Firstly, the relationship between democracy and language is visible in the fact that while democracy thrives on aggregating views and demands of diverse people and groups, language serves as the tool of assembling these diverse views.

Language is therefore 'central to the interactive process' (Bewaji 2002) in Ademowo (2012). Language is a vehicle of communication which can be passed across in writing and speech. He maintains further that language is a code which can be passed across to decoders in order for them to grasp the message therein. Language can also be used as a marker of what is happening at a particular time in a society as well as a powerful tool of control used by the colonial powers. It forms a large part of the culture of the people. There is a symbiotic relationship between language and culture. Your language has a lot to do with your identity. He who have no language has no identity.

Nigeria is faced with monumental linguistic cross road arising from multilingualism and ethnic linguistic diversity. This is because, within the geographical boundary known as Nigeria, there are approximately 400-500 distinct languages.

The social function languages (particularly local languages) perform will then serve as a catalyst to harness the people's potentials. For society to continue to grow, the masses must be carried along and language is used to do it. One of the basic concerns of language is to mobilise the people in the society so as to be in line with government policies as well as legislation. One of the most effective carriers of language as a mobilising factor is the media. By media here, we mean the mass media which are used to disseminate information messages, persuasion, public relation, education and others. Because language is a vehicle of communication, media and language cannot be separated.

### Conceptual Clarification Development

Development as a concept is a victim of definitional pluralism. It is a difficult word to define. However, attempts have been made by erudite scholars to conceptualize development. The definition by Gboyega (2003) will be explored for the purpose of this study. Gboyega (2003) captures development as an idea that embodies all attempts to improve the conditions of human existence in all ramifications. It implies improvement in national well being of all citizens, not the most powerful and rich alone, in a sustainable way such that today's consumption does not imperil the future, it also demands that poverty and inequality of access to the good things of life be removed or drastically reduced. It seeks to improve personal security and livelihoods and expansion of life chances.

### National Development

National, according to *Longman dictionary of contemporary English*, refers to a phenomenon that embraces a whole nation. National development therefore can be described as the overall development or a

collective socio-economic, political as well as religious advancement of a country or nation. This is best achieved through development planning, which can be described as the country's collection of strategies mapped out by the government.

### **Language Education and Sustainable National Development**

Education is the most potent instrument for social progress. It is the greatest power yet known to man for his own improvement. For us, education is seen as a tool used for the integration of the individual into the society so that he can achieve self-realization, develop national consciousness, promote unity and strive for social, economic, political, scientific, cultural, and technological progress.

For an individual to be developed, he needs to attain the developmental and environmental needs of his immediate environment. This can only be achieved through education. Education is the bedrock of human and National development. Its importance cannot be overemphasized. It carries a nation forward; for this to happen there must be literacy programme.

In the context of this paper, we view language very much as a tool, in the sense of Everett (2012), for communication values, beliefs, ideologies and the attendant knowledge systems that is packaged therein. Sustainable National Development on the other hand has been seen from different perspectives. Some see it as "a globally economic dimensions but with context-bound implementation strategies". (Mavesera 2010:76). Buba (2006:1) views sustainable National development as a process that has to do with "continuity and positive change as well as the involvement of the citizenry in activities that will lead to the nourishing of a country's economy" Seen from a similar perspective, then, sustainable national development in Africa context is intertwined with language of the Africa people because such languages as Egbokhare (2004:507) noted "hold the key to the heart of the people and consequently the knowledge and treasures".

The issue of what to do with the numerous languages in Africa and Nigeria in particular need not cause endless debates so long as there is the political will to properly utilize the benefits that the nation can derive from appropriating the abundant linguistic resources for sustainable national development. Countries with similar language problems like Tanzania, South Africa, Malaysia, Singapore, Canada did not only succeed in addressing the issue successfully, but have also invested in their languages. The emergence of South Africa as a science and technology giant of Africa is attributed to effective language policy. Buba (2006:8) reports that "it is in recognition of the need for indigenous languages to be part of the rapidly expanding technological environment that eleven (11) indigenous languages (representing 98% of the population) were adopted as official languages. The diverse language resources have enhanced the achievement of government's goal to promote democracy, justice equity and national unity. Malaysia and Singapore are thriving because they create ideas in their native languages. The same goes to Japan and Russia.

In Nigeria, English is our official language, but, it is possible to form a policy in which we can promote our languages for instruction, transaction, diplomacy, and commerce. If you go to Indonesia, they speak English but everybody speaks Bahasa-Indonesia. Why can't we do the same in Nigeria? China is ruling the world's global market because everything is done in Chinese Language. Nigeria could record a better achievement if the indigenous languages are effectively utilized as a means of communication and social mobilisation.

### **Indigenous Languages and Nigeria Transformation**

Indigenous languages are tribal, native or local languages spoken. The language would be from a linguistically distinct community that has been settled in the area for many generations. Indigenous languages are not necessarily national languages and the reverse is also true there are about 400 indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria, and only few of these languages have written forms. These languages comprise both minority and majority languages as well as some few non-Nigeria languages such as English, Arabic and French. Among these languages, there are considered as major by the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria. The major languages are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. It must be noted that these languages have acquired their majority status solely on the demographic strength and not because of any inherent qualities they possess that the other languages lack.

Unfortunately, leaders in Nigeria view the multi-lingual make-up of the country as an obstacle, not a resource; they look to overcome it with large sweeping policies of language of the wider community (LWC preference in political, social and economic matters. This alienates the most disenfranchised speakers of minority languages further from the decision making process. In this regard, the Nigerian languages policy must be redirected towards improvement of indigenous languages and their proper utilization for the attainment of transformation goals. We must accept the potentials of indigenous languages for domestication

of knowledge and broad based grass root reach as against the English Language. If English brings unity, local dialects hold the key to development. Therefore, the Nigeria local languages must be utilized to harness and transform the nation to greater height.

### **Social Mobilisation in Nigeria**

It is pertinent to note that in any country, to a reasonable extent, the credibility of any government will depend on how much it is able to carry the masses along. Omole (1991), noted that social mobilization is a matter of persuasion, information and public relations. These can be conveyed by the use of language. He further added that mass mobilization is also a:

*...pragmatic type of enlightenment campaigns desired to persuade and galvanise a group of people towards understanding and accepting certain ideas or policies more or less as important, normal or logical, thereby ensuring co-operations and solidarity with the authority (P.2)*

Frankly speaking, in Nigeria like in other countries, social mobilisation is often a campaign which is normally carried out through the media. It can be print media, electronic media or the mass as a whole. For the thrust of this paper, our concern will be on social mobilization and language use especially in the electronic media like radio and television. However, some radios may not be electronic depending on the area where it is being used but it still falls in the line of electronic media.

Radio, television and print media are essentially unidirectional in medium. This is because they use language to address the mind of the audience but they do not allow simultaneous feedback. The listener or reader cannot immediately respond to the information passed across. But the fact that they are unidirectional does not prevent the media from carrying out the mobilization policies of the government. This is because, in mobilization, the aim of government is to pass the message to the masses and for the masses to fall in line with the message and not to give a talk-back which in some ways can form a digression from the intention of the government.

A government is credible to a large extent, if it can carry the masses along in its policies. Government will always want to win the heart of its citizenry toward supporting its ideals and plans. If a government embarks on a touching issue or sensitive programmes, be it politically, economically or otherwise, it will need effective mass mobilization campaign. In Nigeria, a lot of policies and programmes had been adopted. Examples are fuel subsidy campaign, the transition programme, national Census, Structural adjustment programme, Anti-AIDS campaign, Ethical Revolution Health, for all in 2020 programme, and a host of others. The primary concern of the government is to carry the masses along with these policies and programmes. These mobilization efforts can be successful depending on the degree of effectiveness of the use of language at the right time. This is because, before citizens are mobilized, there must be something which will relay the mobilization strategies and language is that force that can do this.

Because language situation in Nigeria is problematic as well as delicate because of the pluralistic nature of our society, the government has therefore adopted a number of languages for its mobilisation with a view to reaching a good number of audiences in the country. Such include the Nigerian Local Languages (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) and English language. Similarly, the Nigerian Media also uses English-based Pidgin as a means of Social Sensitization.

### **Language as an Instrument For Social Mobilisation**

Language is the chief instrument for social mobilization. According to Schaefer (2000:52) in Hanafi (2013) language is "an abstract system of word, meaning and symbols for all aspects of culture which include speech, written characters, numerals, symbols, and gestures and expressions of non-verbal communication. Language therefore helps us to order our thought in a coherent form; again, it imposes the thinking habit of our community upon us. Using language to mobilize citizens is therefore paramount in the human society.

In mobilising the citizens, the issue of enlightenment is primary. In fact, enlightenment is a major instrument of social mobilisation. Before the masses are enlightened, language channel is considered. The languages that are mainly used in mobilization in Nigeria are:

- (i) English language
- (ii) Pidgin
- (iii) Local languages

### **English language**

Although ethnic plurality and linguistic diversity in Nigeria compounded our problems, we still cannot circumvent the fact that English has come to stay as one of the Nigerian languages. Considering the interpretation of UNESCO in its report on language of education in 1951, English language is Nigeria's lingua

franca. It is Nigeria's neutral language, official language, a second language to the majority of Nigerians who speak English appropriately for different purposes. As far as language is concerned, English language is virtually the most important means of communication in Nigeria. It cuts across different ethnic barriers. Because its use cuts across culture and ethnic background, government is employing it in its public enlightenment campaign at various government levels in different mass media. Apart from using it to educate the citizens, it is still being used to impart awareness and national consciousness that underline the national unity of the country.

#### **Pidgin English**

Using the Nigerian perspectives, it will be discovered that quite a considerable fraction of illiterates and semi-illiterates in various circles do use pidgin. A lot of interference do occur in pidgin. Pidgin is non-complex and easy to understand. Decamp (1979), observes that pidgin is characterized by a limited vocabulary and an elimination of many grammatical devices, imported from other languages can be added. For example: you bi yam head, I go nack you for ya head, yeye man, etc. Pidgin being a language used by wider majority of people is enjoying an overwhelming support in the media. It is being used for advertisement on radios and televisions. In the electronic media, pidgin is a very popular language of mobilisation, persuasion, education as well as for maintaining good public relations. In The Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Lagos, consider this rendition on AIDS;

*You see one woman you chop am*

*You see anoda woman you nack am*

*You see anoda woman, you deck am*

*My brada, my sister, AIDS no dey show for face ooo!*

*If you dey change woman like wrapper, you dey play with snake o!*

*AIDS na fire wey water no fit quench*

*AIDS no get melecine o!*

This is an appeal to all and this appeals cuts across the various segments or strata of the society because this dreadful issue of AIDS is no longer a new thing to the society.

#### **Local/ethnic language**

Prior to the emergence of English which is the neutral language that cuts across ethnic barriers, we had out local languages. In fact in Nigeria, it is hardly possible to get a person who has no local language. Majority of Nigerians who are only monolingual in their local language are illiterates. Intra-ethnic consumption is being achieved through ethnic languages which are as well common in media houses especially those that are ethnic-specific. So, in the West the popular ethnic language is Yoruba, in the North – Hausa, in the East – Igbo. There are also many of the popular local languages that are being used to reach the target population. In Edo and Delta States, Edo, Urhobo, Ika, Aniocha languages among others are popular. Tiv is one of the popular languages in the Middle Belt. What all these boil down to is that to a very good extent, ethnic language is used for social mobilisation in the media.

#### **Conclusion**

The gamut of this article examines issues relating to language as an instrument for national development and social mobilisation in Nigeria. This paper also examines indigenous languages as resources for national transformation if properly harnessed. In spite of the fact that Nigeria constitutes a widespread of languages of which majority is Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo languages and has widely spoken both regionally and internationally, English language continues to maintain its colonial official language status in politics, educational instructions, national re-orientation and sensitization. This paper also emphasizes how countries like South Africa, Canada, Indonesia, Malaysia, China, Tanzania and others have utilized their numerous languages towards the development of their countries. In Nigeria, English language, Pidgin and local languages are mainly used in social mobilisation efforts. Finally, although numerous hiccups abounds, language (especially local languages) still play a pivotal role for instruction in the Nigerian Educational System, social mobilization and national transformation.

#### **Recommendations**

In view of the above claims and assertions on the pivotal role of languages (particularly local languages) in the Nigerian educational system, national development and social mobilisation, the writer recommends that:

1. Government should invest more on linguists and teachers of Nigerian local languages to enhance productivity.

2. The codification of various indigenous languages should be undertaken. It is a herculean task for government alone to shoulder the responsibility of codification i.e orthography, producing reading materials, grammar, dictionaries and so on. The linguistic group should assist in getting at least an orthography for their languages.
3. Parents should change their attitude towards the indigenous languages, the notion that it is only through the Colonial Master's language that one can progress in life has to be discarded. Countries such as Japan, China, Russia, Germany and others have progressed using their indigenous languages.
4. All the agents for social mobilisation must be responsible in their reportage, especially in the use of languages such as English language, English-based Pidgin and local languages such as Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo.
5. Government should provide free flow of information and encourage dialogue in all its policies with local Nigerian languages.

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