

LEVERAGING NIGERIA'S INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This paper explores the potentials of Nigerian indigenous languages for national development. It is on the need to leverage on the use of indigenous languages for national growth. This stems from the fact that most Nigerian languages are not developed and utilized for this purpose. Language is at the centre of all human activities, thus making the development of a language is paramount in the development of any nation. Several nations have progressed through the proper utilization of their language resources. Language is not only a cultural heritage, but an intellectual heritage, since it is used to convey knowledge and technical know-how or skills which are needed for national development. National development is tied to language in all aspects. Indigenous languages are great resources of cultural practices which are responsible for human communication. Individuals can develop educationally, socially, politically, economically and culturally by interacting with government agencies or establishments, which in turn convey their policies and programmes to the general populace through

their indigenous languages. Indigenous languages play a vital role in development in the areas of democracy, technology and other aspects of life. This is because when people are informed and educated in their own language, they get more involved. Data for the paper was obtained mainly through library research. Findings reveal that most Nigerian indigenous languages have not been fully utilized for national development. It concludes that even with the potentials observed, the nation is yet to harness these resources for growth and progress. The paper therefore suggests that for any meaningful development to take place, the people must be carried along; and they will have a greater sense of belonging when they are informed and instructed in their own languages. To this end, efforts must be made to maintain Nigerian indigenous languages for optimal utilization and for greater developmental strides.

Key Words: Development, indigenous, language, leverage, national

Introduction

Language is a major facilitator of the development of human societies. Therefore, the development of a language enhances the level or progress of human development. Language has been instrumental to the evolution of past civilizations through successive generations. The Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Chinese etc. each developed a rich civilization as a result of their highly developed language and have transmitted their rich culture and civilization to other parts of the world such as contained in Greek and Roman literatures (Nwanyanwu 2). In the same way, the dominant position of the US today in world affairs is largely aided by the use of the English language.

There exist about 6,000 languages (and dialects) around the globe, half of which are threatened with extinction (Romaine 36). The adoption of the English language by the colonial masters for administration, education and commerce in Nigeria marked the beginning of the decline in function of indigenous languages. With the loss of social and economic privileges, indigenous languages soon began to lose

(active, native) speakers around the country. A major setback to the growth of indigenous languages is the attitude of its speakers. Many native speakers of these languages do not promote their use in several aspects of life.

Language is an indispensable aspect of the life of a community and serves as a symbol of identity, as well as a store of the people's culture. It is the main attribute that distinguishes man from other animals. The most important part of a people's culture is their mother tongue in which all other features of their culture and civilization or history are preserved and expressed.

Recognizing the resourcefulness of indigenous languages will foster collective enhancement in the areas of national security, technology and education in general. A conscious effort towards the development and codification of indigenous languages will foster national unity and cultural awareness. Cultural awareness entails the recognition of group identity and solidarity which are ideas and values that are better transmitted and propagated through the indigenous languages.

Objectives

The objectives of the paper are to:

- i) analyse the potentials of Nigerian indigenous languages for national development.
- ii) assess the use of Nigerian indigenous languages

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- iii) examine the status and function of Nigerian indigenous languages
- iv) assess the extent to which Nigerian indigenous languages are used
- v) evaluate the extent to which indigenous languages have been used for national development

Methodology

The data for this paper was obtained through library research. Data was obtained from relevant works related to the topic in books, academic journals and other sources related to the present research. The research is qualitative in nature.

Language and National Development

National development is intricately tied to language. Language facilitates development in all aspects. Development is defined by different people based on their perspectives which are in turn shaped by their respective disciplines. However, it should be stressed that the goal of every development is the improvement of humanity to bring about better living conditions. Advancements in technology and economic prosperity, among others, are seen as pointers to development not because they are admired for their own sake, but because they contribute to the advancement and upliftment of humanity. Igiri (4) quotes Obasi stating that national development is the "progressive transformation of the economic, social and political structures of a society from relatively less complex, less efficient and less desirable forms to relatively more complex, more efficient and more desirable forms".

The term 'national development' is, therefore, a product of human thought. However, following our understanding that no thought is possible without language, national development is at the same time the product of language. Thus, the formation of the term, national development is made possible because, as human beings, we have the capacity to use language. This serves as a strong proof of the relationship between language and national development, in which language is seen to be the bedrock of the relationship. National development is thus said to be possible largely because of the availability of language to mankind.

Language is used to communicate strategies towards national development, such as to inform or enlighten the citizens of outcomes of such strategies. Through this government gets the support of its citizens in achieving certain development goals. Assessments and analysis of objectives and results are also carried out through the instrumentality of language. Language is also used for documentation and preservation of various types of

human achievements, for future use or reference. The achievements of nations, their mistakes and their relations with other nations are all documented through the use of language.

Language is not only a cultural heritage but an intellectual heritage, since it is used to convey knowledge and local as well as technical know-how or skills, which are inevitable for national development.

Indigenous Languages and National Development

Language is an important variable in national development. Both the formulation of policies for national development and their articulation and final execution are carried out by means of language. Indigenous languages are great sources of cultural practice which are responsible for human communication among members of an ethnic group. National development encompasses the development of individuals in a nation. Individuals can develop educationally, socially, politically economically and culturally by interacting with government agencies or establishments which in turn convey their policies and programmes to the people through indigenous languages. Native languages play a significant role in development in the areas of democracy, technology, and other aspects of national life.

Nigerian indigenous languages have a great role in enhancing cultural nationalism. The study of indigenous languages gives an insight to the various aspects of our cultural heritage. The more Nigerians know themselves (and one another) the more the strength and the desire to keep and uphold natural values and interests. Having a good knowledge of our culture is essential for the protection and preservation of our national interest. A working knowledge of an indigenous language is a veritable tool for national development; and this will also help in the management of the ethno-linguistic or ethno-religious crises plaguing the country for so long now. Moreover, when more people know and speak more of one another's languages, it will go a long way in curtailing suspicion that breeds conflicts all the time. However, because of increasing interaction among Nigerians through the medium of the English language, there is little cultural exchange(s) among them; also because of their inability to speak one or more of their indigenous languages. Regrettably, the younger generation is further drifting away from the knowledge and use of their native languages, which is a bad omen for the country. The attitudes of scholars and policy makers has over the years not been encouraging, which further places the indigenous languages at risk of falling out of use.

Nwayanwu maintains that:

Language is indeed a major repository of culture, a means of communicating ideas and thoughts. Indigenous languages have the prospect of being agents of technological advancement. This is because most of the technologically developed societies like China, South Korea, Japan and the West achieved technological feats using their native tongues (4).

The position of English in global affairs and its function in Nigeria have made the indigenous languages to perpetually remain in subordinate positions in the life of the nation. What is needed ultimately is the harnessing and development of the indigenous languages to make them economically and socially viable in all facets of interaction. Human civilizations begin with language which has the potential and strength to construct possible models of human experience. Language gives life to human activities including efforts and achievements in science and technology.

National development refers to the improvement in the living conditions of the citizens of a country. This can be in the area of education, economy, politics or science and technology. People develop educationally, socially, economically, politically and culturally by their interaction with government agencies that roll out ideas and policies through various media in the languages that they best understand.

Because of the dominance of English in most facets of national life, Nigerians have developed different types of attitudes to English and Nigerian indigenous languages (Olaoye 29). The elite, especially, have developed patterned language behaviour in the supposed superiority of English over indigenous languages.

Recognizing the importance of the mother tongue in (especially early) education, the federal government states that the language of instruction in the primary school should be the child's mother tongue or the language of the immediate community as enunciated in the National Policy on Education. Indigenous languages are important resources with which the society functions. Therefore, for any meaningful national development, attention must be paid to the languages with which the people organize their thoughts, ideas and needs. The teaching and learning of indigenous languages is especially valuable because it connects the people to their language and culture, land and people, as well as an expression of the people's identity. To be knowledgeable in one's language and culture is not only an intellectual

ability but a perfect process of self-realization.

The policies and programmes of government are transmitted to the grassroots through their indigenous languages. The unity of a country depends on mutual understanding among the diverse groups, and this can be achieved only through the instrumentality of language. For this reason, the Nigerian government demands that each child should be exposed to or learns at least one of the three major languages other than his mother tongue. It is language that unites people. Therefore indigenous languages give strength to a nation.

Indigenous languages serve as instruments of political, social and cultural education. Most government policies formulated in the English language in their technical terms are beyond the reach of the vast majority of the people that are not exposed to Western education. To bridge this gap, indigenous languages can be used to reach the people; and as the people are carried along, they will all cooperate to work for the general development of the nation. On a positive note, the National Language Policy states that any of the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) may be used, in addition to English, to conduct proceedings in the state Houses of Assembly. This is a good move towards utilizing local languages for national development. Language is needed to create a new political or democratic culture, and every political thought is expressed by means of language. Political contests and manipulations are also conducted through language. When government policies or developmental communication is carried out in a language not accessible to rural dwellers, they may only rely on unscrupulous politicians who will come in the guise of representing their interests, and who may end up misleading them.

If Nigerian languages serve the same purpose of informing and educating the public, serving as a mirror of the society that speaks it, to interpret the process of development and serve as a tool for social change, then it is just logical that they are considered and regarded as resources which should be used for national self-realization and development. This should counter the claim by some thinkers that multiplicity of languages is a problem, a burden and an inconvenience.

Proper and efficient language policy and planning in a multilingual society as Nigeria should be able to tackle the problem of ethnicity and put into consideration the interests and aspirations of all segments of the society. This is only possible with the adoption of an ideology which respects the rights of all language groups irrespective of the size of the speakers. Minority languages must not succumb to the domineering influence of the majority. It is important to stress that the

support and use of all languages in a polity are necessary for their harmonious co-existence and survival. In a multilingual society as Nigeria, all languages should be seen as resources which need to be harnessed effectively for the general good of the society. The nation needs to bring up policies that will encourage and support mutual harmonious co-existence of all the languages, irrespective of their size or status. In this way, all languages and cultures will contribute to national growth and development. With this type of approach, every citizen of the country will have a sense of belonging and pride in the nation.

The present situation in Nigeria is that of a conflict arising from the subordinate position accorded the minority languages of the country. This partly explains why language policies have not been fully implemented. Therefore, Oyetade recommends that:

there should be a decentralization of power, such that states and local governments should be allowed to make their own policies with regard to their languages. Thus the linguistic rights of all Nigerians will be protected....To be sure, language is a precious resource of a people, embracing their intellectual wealth, their view of the world, their identity, the in verbal art, etc. The loss of language, and by implication, the attendant cultural system it expresses, therefore means an irretrievable loss of diverse and interesting intellectual wealth, and the object of study of linguists. This must not be allowed to happen. (12)

Therefore the government, in collaboration with native speakers and linguists, should work towards reducing linguistic inequality and promote all Nigerian languages to have the capacity for national development.

Indigenous languages must be fully utilized and sustained for any meaningful development to take place. Abandoning the use of our native languages will lead to their being endangered and ultimately lost. A language is said to be endangered when the number of its speakers keep diminishing. In this case, it is also restricted in use. With smaller and smaller portions of the population speaking it, it decreases in active use until it finally gets extinct when no living native speaker is found.

For different reasons such as inferiority complex, desire to identify with major languages or even outright negative attitude, speakers of smaller or less dominant languages stop using their indigenous language and begin using another or others. When parents begin using only

that second language with their children, the transmission of the indigenous language is reduced and will ultimately cease. A language may become dormant or moribund if it is not spoken but exists only in recordings or written documents. However, languages that have not been codified disappear completely.

The causes of language endangerment have been found to include conquest, migration, lack of relevance, political domination, trade and negative attitude of speakers in a multilingual society. The greatest factor for the loss of a language is the negative attitude of its speakers. A sure way of self-colonization is abandoning one's language of heritage to adopt another. Language death can also occur through over-borrowing from the so-called "prestigious" languages or outright denial of usage through language policy. The panacea to this problem is documentation. It is a known fact that the loss of a language is the loss of the people's collective culture and identity, just as the strength of any nation or civilization is a function of its language and culture.

The development of Nigerian indigenous languages is facing a lot of challenges. There is the problem of a clear demarcation between full languages and dialects of the same language (maybe as a result of migration, long non-contact periods etc). Others include haphazard research, inadequate funding of research, inadequate facilities, the intangibility of language, the ideological argument against the number of indigenous languages, and epileptic utilities (Olaoye 32). To this end, efforts must be made towards the documentation of Nigerian indigenous languages. Language research should be encouraged through efforts by government, the mass media, and other supporting bodies. When language research is well funded, our indigenous languages will serve as a veritable tool for national development. The government should provide more support to the National Institute for Nigerian Languages, Abba, to document more indigenous languages.

In the Nigerian linguistic arrangement, three major languages have been recognized as regional languages which may share official status with the English language in their respective regions in certain official engagements. While some of them have been fully codified with standard writing systems, some are still at a low level of codification and a vast majority others are not yet codified, thereby having no writing systems. It is to be noted that an uncoded language has less chances of survival in a multilingual society than the one that is codified and has elaborate functions in many aspects of life of the community. To this effect, Olaoye remarks that "one of the greatest challenges in the optimal utilization of indigenous languages is that many do not have

orthographies and those that are available are not well developed for literary use. Many indigenous languages are becoming moribund and are on their way to extinction, as a result of lack of use.”(31)

In any multilingual population, language is the immediate marker of identity. While it may not be the only marker of group identity, language is the rallying point for any society. It has been observed that language can serve as a critical symbol of the social and political identity of a person or group. Thus, when a language is entrusted with this kind of symbolic significance, any threat to the health and survival of that language can ignite a massive mobilization (Mabry, 197). Language is tied to group identity; so when a group identity is threatened, it is pertinent for the group to protect their heritage and prevent the language from being assimilated into a majority language or completely abandoned.

Although language planning is essential in all societies, it is more crucial for multilingual nations. Language planning is a goal-oriented activity which may be done to improve the efficiency and beauty of an existing language. It may be an attempt to efficiently utilize language in national development like in the field of education, science, international relations etc. It may also aim at assigning roles to various languages in a multilingual society. For countries with several dominant or non-dominant languages, unity and integration can only be through the co-existence of several languages within a state or nation. This will entail serious efforts at proper language planning, which may involve some costs in using more than one language in administration and education. Even in countries where a particular major language is used as official language, roles should be appropriated to other languages such as in primary education (Bamgbose15)

Conclusion

The strength of a multilingual nation lies in its flexibility and the scope it allows for full participation of the different ethnic or linguistic groups. National unity cannot be achieved by denying the existence of language differences in a multilingual society. Moreover, the recognition of the diverse groups and the assignment of meaningful roles to them will create a sense of belonging and loyalty even in the midst linguistic differences.

All languages in the nation should be given their identity function which is the primary functions, and be allocated some important functions such as in education/literacy, media, administration, parliament, business/commerce etc. for national development in the private and public circles. These functions contribute to the vitality of a language thereby raising or even

maintaining its status. The aim of planning should be to develop a multilingual and multicultural society like Nigeria so that all ethno-linguistic identities are recognized, developed, preserved and harnessed for national development and unity.

Oral tradition is essential in the preservation of the original form of a language. A language is kept alive mostly by speaking it, because the culture of the people transmitted to the younger ones by word of mouth through stories has a long lasting effect on them. Oral tradition includes a great variety of spoken forms including proverbs, riddles, tales, nursery rhymes, legends, myths, epic songs and poems, charms, prayers, chants, songs, dramatic performance and more. Oral traditions and expressions are used to pass on knowledge, cultural and social values and collective memory. By this, they play an important role in keeping cultures alive.

Keeping oral traditions alive is a way to maintain a language. The same way, keeping a language alive is a way to maintain cultural diversity. Different languages transmit stories, poems, and songs peculiar to a society on different themes. Therefore, the death of a language clearly leads to the permanent loss of oral traditions and expressions. However, if oral tradition is maintained and used to propagate the values of the society, it can best help to safeguard a language rather than dictionaries, grammars and database all put together. Languages live in songs and stories, riddles and rhymes and so the protection of languages and the transmission of oral traditions and expressions are very closely related.

Many smaller languages are disappearing from the face of the earth due to the spread of a few world languages such as English, French or Chinese. It has been estimated that eleven languages are spoken by about 70 per cent of the world's population. In this light, the majority of the world's languages are minority languages. Some linguists have said that the prospects for survival of most of these languages over the next century are gloomy.

The choices made by individuals on an everyday basis have an effect on the long-term situation of the languages concerned. Language shift generally involves bilingualism as a stage on the way to eventual monolingualism in a new language. A community which was once monolingual becomes bilingual as a result of contact with another (usually socially more powerful) group and becomes transitionally bilingual in the new language until their own language is finally given up altogether.

In order to maintain all the languages in a plural society, specific roles may be assigned to different languages in a speech community. For example, in Nigeria English is assigned the role of official language,

namely the language of education, politics, the media, trade and commerce, the judiciary, administration and science and technology, while Nigerian indigenous languages are assigned the role of regional or ethnic affiliations. It is hereby recommended that more roles be assigned to indigenous languages to expand their scope. In addition, the languages should be kept in constant use by the native speakers who should hand them down to upcoming generations.

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