

REPOSITIONING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE POLICY AND THE QUEST FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

Nmadumelu Obi, Lawal Suleiman & Muhammad Alhaji Bukar

Department of English, Federal College of Education, Zaria

Abstract

Language serves as the most convenient and effective means of expressing one's feelings, thoughts and needs. Given the vital role that language plays in the society, this paper examines the relevance of indigenous languages in the realization of national development in Africa (Nigeria). The paper further, x-rays language policy and national development in Nigeria while emphasizing the need for repositioning indigenous languages policy for effective national development and fostering unity in the country. Among other recommendations, there is need for mental decolonization of Nigerians vis a vis our indigenous languages by releasing our minds of any feeling of inferiority in terms of language and culture.

Keywords: language, policy, development, indigenous.

Keywords: Language, Development and National Development

Introduction

Language is a vital instrument of communication and an invaluable medium through which people and nations of the world interact. It is a social phenomenon concerning social and cultural notions of the people. Language however, is regarded as one of the most important aspects of the culture of any society past and present. The focus of this paper therefore, is to discuss issues relating to repositioning of indigenous language policy and the quest for national development. This will be done by explicitly explaining what language entails, development, national

development, language policy in Nigeria, repositioning process of indigenous languages for national development. Language has been the tool of change and a medium that facilitate the changes need outstanding policy backing. The non-utilization of indigenous language in reaching people has hampered development drastically in Nigeria. Policies and programme implementation in Nigeria have been affected because of the non-utilization of indigenous languages. This however, means that all programmes and policies can be successful only when the proper and effective communication medium is used. It is against this background that this paper x-rays indigenous language policy and the quest for national development in Nigeria.

Language

Language is a principal source of group identity and the transmission of that identity to other groups of people. The word “language” connotes different things to different people. Language is so complex that its definition cannot be fully accounted for by any one wholly consistent and comprehensive theory. To Sapir (1921) cited in Jindal (2015) “ language is a purely human and non-instinctive methods of communicating ideas, emotions, desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols’ . Language as Sapir rightly point out is human. Only humans possess language and all normal humans uniformly possess it. Animals do have a communication system but it is not a developed system. That is why language is said to be specie-specific and species-uniform.

Adejumobi (2009) is of the opinion that “language is human vocal sound, or it is the graphic representation of signs and symbols, gesticulation and signals for the purpose of communication. It is obvious that, Adejumobi’s definition centers on language as a means of expressing one’s thought. Hence, it has a great influence on human thinking as well as human interaction.

Similarly, Brumfit (1985) definition cited in Adeniyi (2011) is in line with Sapir's, view on language, and according to him, language could be said to mean the relationship between words and experience and it could be produced and received in form of the verbalization of experiences or experiences of verbalization. Verbalization of experiences occurs when we produce language by talking and writing, that is putting our reaction to experience within and around us into words. On the other hand, experiences of verbalization occur when we receive language by listening and reading, making sense out of the words of others and understanding them in their context of use.

Development

Development is seen as a process which has to do with a gradual unfolding or growth of something. It is seen as progressive growth which eventually brings out the dominant capabilities of something that was already in existence into a well grown state. To Adediji (1992) development is a “constant and appreciable amelioration in economic, social, technological, political and cultural aspect of life of a people”. My 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) claims 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” The concept of development as conceived by this paper covers all areas such as human, economics, socio-political, scientific and technological progress.

National Development

National development is seen by Awolokun (1995) as a minimum socio and political development as well as economic development in the building of a national identity. The ability of a country to improve the social welfare of the people by providing

social amenities like quality education, water, good roads, access to health facilities etc accounts for the development of any nation. Education is basic to any form of development. Since we cannot talk of education without the language through which the concepts are expressed, English as the language of education in Nigeria contributes in no small way to the rapid development experienced in Nigeria. There is no doubt that Nigeria, as a country has benefited tremendously through the use of the English language to advance the development of the country. Several scholars have attested to the international value of English language.

Language Policy in Nigeria

The Federal Government of Nigeria, conscious of the importance of the indigenous languages and the role these languages can play in the proper education of the Nigerian child for national cohesion; gives prominence to the issues of local languages in the National Policy on Education. According to Brann (2006), “Nigeria has what may be described as 70 dominant languages; i.e those spoken in each case by at least 100,000 of the country’s 589 LGAs about 362 (23%) are dominated by one of the three major languages: Hausa 156 (23%); Yoruba 120 (20%) and Igbo 85 (15%), about 104 (18%) are dominated by 13 of the dominant state languages, and about 113 (20%) by one of the 54 ‘local’ languages’. It is the position of this paper, that all the groups and individuals that constituted the population above, by right needs to have their language rights defined.

In an attempt to meet such right, the need for the position of indigenous languages have been diffusely expresses in various policy statements in Nigeria but have not been given absolute consideration. For instance, among the fundamental right of Chapter 4 of the 1999 constitution, is the right to use a language that will be understood by a majority who is not able to express his/herself on the official language-English; the right to education

in a familiar language which the NPE, 4th edition (2004) stipulates that the initial medium of instruction must be either the “mother tongue” or the language of the learner’s immediate environment.

The 1989 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria paragraph 38 clearly revealed the right to information in the various languages of Nigeria. It states that “every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference”. In a similar vein, Brann (2006) states “... the 19 state broadcasting services of the Second Republic followed a coordinated policy on this issue, by using:

- i. English as a link language and by choosing;
- ii. Several ‘state languages’ for newscasts as well as;
- iii. a large number of features for cultural programmes in all together over 100 Nigerian languages.

In addition, issues relating to procedures for summoning and resolving House of Assembly issues; the constitution of the FRN Chapter 4, Part V Section 97 states that:

The business of the House of Assembly shall be conducted in English, but the House may in addition to English, conduct the business of the House in one or more other languages spoken in the state as the House may be resolution approve.

The above extract, by implication means that language policy in Nigeria contains clearly and lucidly decorative statements. It is quite obvious that the language policy has not been adequately applied right from independence to date. This is an indication that the policies stated above lack implementation. Hence, any society where indigenous languages are not developed due to ineffective planning and nonchalant attitude of those in control of the affairs will certainly be a failure in all initiatives designed for the people

and the country, no matter how important it may be to the people and their country (Hisham, 2010).

The National Language Policy as contained in the National Policy on Education (1981 revised) provides for Nigerians the opportunity to be able to read and write in three or more ethnic languages thus, enabling them to share experiences with other communities thereby enhancing national unity. The document provides among others as follows:

- (a) the full integration of the individual into the community. Section I Para. 9 (j) every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment.

Section II Para 14 (c) “Government shall ensure that the medium of instructions is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community”.

From the above provision, it is crystal that the government has made good provision for the development of the local languages. This is in the belief that each language group should be allowed or even encouraged to develop to its full capacity so as to be able to contribute its own quota to the development of the Nigerian state.

Indigenous Languages and the Quest for National Development

According to Elugbe (1990) one of the ways through which a country is said to be developed is when it is united. It is quite agreed that indigenous languages are rich and effective in reaching its people. It is a raw material that brings about effective changes in the perception of individual. If a nation like Nigeria wants her citizens to imbibe/inculcate patriotism to the ideals of the country and at the same time, reorient their attitude and making them believe in themselves, it should use indigenous languages

because the indigenous languages have the criteria and qualifications of doing the jobs. Language been the key to people's heart and psychology can only be successful through appropriate and effective application. Adesanya (2009) points out that, '... for local government needs a new reorientation, a new philosophy, a new mindset in our dressing, manner of approach, relationship with government and neighbours... (to) produce the best citizens in Nigeria". From Adesanya's view, it can be deduced that development entails "cultural reorientation". Hence, to achieve national development is to use language that contains cultural values of the people, which is in turn implicit and explicit on their indigenous languages. In the same vein, Oluwole (2009) in Ojola (2010) maintains that "... parents should inculcate the habit of ...teaching their wards...their mother tongue so that culture will not be lost in the process".

Indigenous languages may be a catalyst for national consciousness and development. This can be done by using its communicative potentials to nurture and sustain the collective aspirations of a group. Similarly, the child learns best in his/her MT because it is a medium through which he acquires language and cultural skills. It is also a powerful means of building emotional and cognitive functioning of the child (Agomo, 2000). For this same reason, indigenous languages are powerful instruments for social mobilization and participation in national issues.

National development is a multidimensional process that involves economic, social and political systems. As a matter of fact, language and national development are partners in progress. Hence, the Federal Government of Nigeria acknowledges language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion (NPE: 9). this informs the inclusion of Nigerian languages in the nation's educational curriculum.

The development and growth of the society cannot be separated from languages which link the people together. With regards to indigenous languages and national development, Owolabi (2006) remarks as follows:

- i. That the use of Nigeria's native language, particularly in specialized domain is a sine qua non for national development.
- ii. That the rapid and genuine technological, political, social and economic empowerment of the vast majority of Nigerians so as to enable them to utilize scientific and technological knowledge in creating wealth, and to contribute meaningfully to national development, can only be possible through the media of their own native languages.

Relatively, Tarugarira (2009) maintains that language like seeds needs to be planted, watered and weeded before it matures and bears fruits. According to him:

For as long as the medium of instruction in Africa schools remains dominantly foreign language, there can be no remarkable self-propelled development... There is no country in the world which has attained advanced technology by depending on a foreign language while looking down upon its own indigenous languages. No education can be adequate in a situation where the mother tongue is false, shallow or trivial.

The above claim, reveals that the relevance of and importance of indigenous languages in the various aspects of the national development such as education, socio-economic, political, cultural and technological development cannot be ever-emphasized. Countries like Malaysia and Singapore have dictionaries and other reference literature for medicine, science

and commerce and at least two of their indigenous languages are equally recognized as English (Tarugarira, 2009:194).

The use, study and development of the indigenous languages has tremendously improved via the information and communication technology (ICT) especially the major ones (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) as well as their relevance in education, social interaction, preservation of culture and in the overall national development. Example, information relating to any Nigerian language can easily be stored, sourced or disseminated through the appropriate website in the internet. This has in turn boosted the efforts of linguistic scholars who have been relentless in their efforts to ensure proper development of the indigenous languages. Similarly, Tarugarira (op.cit) maintains that:

Unless we develop our own languages, we will continue to be only consumers of technologies made by other countries which use their own indigenous languages. Language is central in self identity, self actualization which are important intangibles in building a confident and innovative people who can be agents of national development.

Language is conceptual thinking. Linguistic system plays an important role in the development of conceptual thinking. Research findings in psycholinguistics tend to suggest that children generally have greater control over their indigenous language through which they have their first contact with their homes, families, villages, peers and friends, and which they also have the opportunity to learn from and improve upon through these same source. They interact, sleep and dream in these languages. Hence, indigenous language constitutes a major medium of socialization in Nigeria. The various ethnic

nationalities must be integrated into the collective consciousness of the society for effective social mobilization or reorientation.

Recommendations

From the discussion above, it is crystal to proffer the following recommendations as a way forward to repositioning the Nigeria indigenous languages in order to enhance their roles in national development. Hence, the following are the recommendations for the study:

- i. Nigerians should develop a positive attitude towards the use and study of our indigenous languages. This is because language is a cultural heritage which is indispensable in social interaction and national integration.
- ii. Government should ensure that adequate and relevant books and other learning materials for the indigenous languages are provided in the schools so as to enhance their study.
- iii. Indigenous languages should be used to ensure effective participation of people in politics, religious functions and otherwise considering the multilingual nature of our society.
- iv. Relatively, both the teachers and students of Nigerian indigenous languages should be adequately motivated so as to boost their morale in the teaching and learning of the languages.
- v. More importantly, the teaching and learning of Nigerian languages should be made compulsory in Nigeria schools including the nursery and primary schools. This will enhance the status of the language.
- vi. Parents should encourage their children to speak their local languages as it is said ‘charity begins at home’.

Conclusion

The relevance of indigenous languages to national development cannot be overemphasized. The stand of this paper therefore, is that Nigerian should embrace their indigenous languages at the expense of their official language. The much talk about development in Nigeria will ever remain a mirage if our indigenous languages are relegated to the backdrop. Indigenous language is a powerful factor for unity and development that promotes the felling of oneness, progress and national consciousness. The teaching and learning of the indigenous languages as subjects as well as the medium of instruction will place the languages above all other languages. There is need for mental decolonization of Nigerians vis a vis our indigenous languages by releasing our minds of any feeling of inferiority in terms of language and culture. Finally, the paper does not in any way intend to suggest that the English languages is inferior or incapable of performing economic, social and political functions like the indigenous languages.

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