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Strenghtening The English Language in Nigeria for National Integration

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Abstract

Human beings use language in their daily lives in order to sustain their existence, to take decisions and to form opinions that could lead to self-actualisation. Language is a very effective tool for social cohesion. English, though a foreign language, is adopted by Nigeria as the official language, that is, the language necessary for certain official, educational, commercial or social activities. Nigeria, a multi-lingual and heterogeneous nation, is passing through a remarkable phase of crises, occasioned by prolonged years of military rule, human right abuse, massive corruption, large-scale poverty, ethnic chauvinism, religious bigotry and general insecurity. The nation's image is greatly battered. In view of this, the fragile state of the nation is aggravated by conflict, mistrust and dichotomies. To resolve some of these problems, the need to have a general means of communication arises; hence, the English language becomes an available solution. The federal government in the National Policy on Education outlines one of the objectives of the English language to include fostering of national unity. Therefore, it is the view of this paper that the English language should be strengthened to enhance national unity and social cohesion. This is without bias to the fact that English language is one of the most important languages of the world. The paper concludes that the English language, the symbol of Nigerian unity in diversity, serves as a strong binding force in unifying a diverse-cultural, multi-lingual country like Nigeria.

Introduction

English is one of the major languages of the world. It is identified by linguists as a member of the Germanic branch of the Indo-European family of languages. English, a very influential language, is spoken in areas widely scattered over the globe. At present, it is used regularly by more than three hundred and twenty (320) million people.

English is the most widely studied language in areas where it is not native. The use of English is widespread in international trade, international scholarship and scientific research. More than half of the world scientific and technical journals as well as newspapers are printed in English.

The importance of language to any society cannot be overemphasised. Apart from primarily existing to perform communication function in a society, language also performs other functions such as an ethnic identifier and the unifying factor. Nigeria is a heterogeneous, multilingual nation with different ethnic languages operating daily among the lives of the people. These many indigenous languages are used to meet the communication needs of the various ethnic groups that make up the nation. These languages used at the family and communal levels do promote unity and bonding amongst the people. This explains the cooperation and oneness that exist in a monolingual setting.

Some states in Nigeria have the advantage of homogeneity of language. But this is not so in multilingual states where there are more instances of conflicts. These multilingual states exemplify the nation's situation where multi ethnic chauvinism, mistrust and religious divide have assumed the centre stage and formed the core variable against Nigerian collective ideology and idiosyncrasy.

The insecurity Nigeria is currently experiencing can be summarised as being motivated by two factors: differences in language and religion. In this case, there is need to employ a common language as an instrument to enhance national integration. Dan'Azumi, Mangvwat, Opara and Chingwong (1998) note that in this quest, therefore, the Nigerian government adopts English as the official language of communication. The National Policy on Education (NPE, 1985) outlines the objectives of English to include preparing Nigerian students for higher education, equipping students to live the age of science and technology; and fostering national unity.

This paper views language as an integral part of man and a necessity for any human society. Since language influences thought and thought often conditions action and also influences conduct; suffice it to say that it surpasses communication and social interaction. Since culture and language are some of the hallmarks of national integration, this work calls for the strengthening of the English language, which because of its neutrality has gained acceptance as a common language among the different ethnic groups that make up the country, to enhance national unity.

The Socio Linguistic Situation of Nigeria

Nigeria is a heterogeneous, multilingual nation with different ethnic languages. The language situation in Nigeria is so complex that it has been described as the biblical Tower of Babel. A language ethnography records over five hundred and twenty-one (521) languages and ethnic groups in the country (iproject.com.ng). Three of these languages are classified as the major languages.

The country has a natural division, through the rivers Niger and Benue, into three major areas and these divisions correspond with the three major language groups in the country namely, the Hausa in the north, Igbo in the east and Yoruba in the west. Apart from these ethnic languages, there are other varieties of languages that are in operation in the country, for example, Lingua-franca, Pidgin and Creole.

Akindele and Adegbite (1992) note that unlike the homogeneous societies which have no problem with communication because they have one common language, Nigeria is characterized by diversity of languages. The multiplicity of language is so obvious and grave that within the major ethnic groups, there are still differences in language and dialect. The situation is such that some of the dialects found within a linguistic group are not mutually intelligible even though the speakers belong to the same linguistic group.

Spencer (1992) and Bamgbose (1990) see this situation as a barrier to national unity and development. To break this language barrier, there is the need for a common language to facilitate effective communication. Without a common language, the fragile unity which binds the country together could collapse. The question however is, which language would be used as Nigeria's national language?

Given the Nigerian situation, finding a common national indigenous language will be very difficult if not an impossible task. This is because the choice of any indigenous language as a national language will certainly generate bad feelings of jealousy, rancour, suspicion and fear of ethnic domination and may even lead to the total collapse of the entire nation.

Olofin (2005) states that, as it were, the country needed to find a solution to its language predicament and come out with a common national language. Certainly, this can never be any of the nation's indigenous languages since none of them is politically neutral to serve this purpose. The only option open to Nigeria, therefore, will be the choice of a neutral language. English language becomes readily available for this role.

The Importance of English Language

English is the language of Britain, the US, Australia and others, or the language originally from England. It is now spoken in many other countries and used as a language of international communication throughout the world.

The English language has attained overall prestige globally. Quirk and Greenbuam (1974) posit that English is the most important language in the world. This is partly because of the native speakers who speak it and partly because of its geographical dispersal; that is, in how many continents or countries is its use or is knowledge of it necessary? The third criterion is its vehicular load, that is, to what extent is it a medium for science or literature or other highly regarded cultural manifestation – including way of life? A fourth is the economic and political influence of those who speak it as their own language.

Another scholar Broughton (1978) asserts that of the four to five thousand of the world living languages, English is by far the most widely used. As a mother tongue, it ranked second to Chinese, which is made up of six mutually unintelligible dialects,

little use outside China. On the other hand, the three million native speakers of English are found in every continent, and an equally widely distributed body of second language speakers. Finally, if we add those areas where decisions affecting life and welfare are made and announced in English, we cover one-sixth of the world's population.

English is the world's most widely used language either as a native language, as a second language or as a foreign language. English being such an important language, it is no mistake then that Nigeria adopts it as the official language.

The English Language and Its Uses in Nigeria

The greatest legacy of Nigeria Colonial past is the English language. The historical account of the advent of the English language in the Nigerian society is diverse. Shobomehin (1999) maintains that Christian missionary activities in the 17th century followed by colonialism served as instruments for spreading the language in the country. Ejuyitehie (1996) states that the history of education in Nigeria acknowledges the fact that western education was introduced and spearheaded in Nigeria by Christian missionaries. To convert the people, the indigenous people had to be taught to read and write in the language of the Christian missionaries which was English. The place of the English language was finally cemented by the colonialists after the scramble for Africa in the 19th century.

English is Nigeria's official language, that is, the language necessary for certain official, social, commercial or educational activities within the country. As the language of mediation in the face of nation's linguistic heterogeneity, it deserves serious attention.

In Nigeria, English is used for diverse purposes. First, it is the language of education. Dan'Azumi, Mangvwat, Opara and Chingwong (1998), in their analysis of the uses of the English language in Nigeria, observe that proficiency in the English language is a *sine qua non* to higher education. Since the medium of instruction in our schools is the English language, proficiency in it is measurable with performance in other subjects. To progress further in education, one is expected to possess a credit grade in English.

English is the language of administration in Nigeria. It permeates the three tiers of government – Federal, State and Local. This is because government policies and official publications are written in English. The Nigerian constitution is written in English. Also, the executive, legislative and judicial arms of government use English in their deliberations.

Gbenedio and Anene-Boyle (2004) state that due to the multilingual nature of the country, English language performs the role of integrating the different ethnic groups in the country, thereby assisting in the task of nation building through the achievement of integration and stability. The English language in Nigeria, therefore, functions as the nation's symbol of unity in diversity.

The Making of Nigeria and the Situation of the Nation Today

The Nigerian society has been described as a child of circumstance. Until the promulgation Decree of January, 1914 which led to the signing of a document consolidating the Northern Nigeria Protectorate and the Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria by Lord Frederick Lugard into the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria, the land space now known as Nigeria was made up of diverse ethnic groups with diverse cultures that were far flung and exhibiting tendencies that were unknown and strange to one another. Forty-six years later, Nigeria became an independent state. Makey in Sofunkel (1990) captures the scenario thus:

> The making of modern Nigeria is one of the greatest problems of State building of any area in the world today. A state of such ethnic and religious diversity containing dozens of ancient cultures and hundreds of living languages is indeed more difficult to centralize than was any nation in Europe.

So, from the beginning, Nigeria was a cocktail of contradictions that stood little or no chances of survival and sustenance. Over one hundred and

seven (107) years after the amalgamation, the country is still grappling. How has Nigeria fared after these years?

Umoru (2008) maintains that there is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria today is passing through a remarkable phase of crises. The phase is remarkable, not in terms of the multiplicity of problems, but in view of the fact that all Nigeria's problems are man-made and with focused leadership are easily solvable, yet the country's problems linger on. The majority of the Nigerian populace now lack civil culture, focus and direction; hence, they have cultivated a culture of violence, uncivil conduct and uncivil style of communication.

Agyele (2019) observes that since the attainment of independence, the security situation in the country has not been stable. There have been series of political and ethno-religious crises which are often anchored in cultural, religious, ethnic and language differences. These, thus, camouflaged in the formation of a wide blaze of militia groups such as Boko Haram, Niger Delta Avenger Group, MASSOB, OPC, Ombatse among others, that terrorise the nation with agitations to divide the country. The depth of loss of lives and property in the myriad conflict that is rocking the nation is frightening and unprecedented. The polity is highly heated. Nigerians no longer see themselves as belonging to one common nation. There is strife and a general feeling of insecurity, fear of domination, suspicion, distrust and bitter rivalry. Thus this question arises: How can Nigeria exploit her multi-ethnic advantages from language and culture to fast tract national unity?

National Integration in the Nigerian Context

National Integration basically means the awareness of a common identity amongst the citizens of a nation. Smith (2018) notes that culture is almost always the source of national unity. In his view, without a unified culture, it is nearly impossible for a nation to have cohesion. In fact, most nations that lack a unified culture split into nations defined by the physical boundaries where various cultures dominate, Yugoslavia, for example. Owing to this opinion, how then can a heterogeneous multilingual Nigeria have national integration?

Contrary to the above, Atiku (www.the cableing/restructuring) is of the view that national integration refers to a sense of unity and oneness by citizens of a country to the extent that, despite their diversity, they see themselves as forming a nation. That sense of solidarity encourages them to invest economically, socially, politically and emotionally in the wellbeing of the nation-country. National integration does not mean the absence of disagreements but those disagreements play out and are resolved within the parameters laid out by the country's laws and regulations and in a manner that preserves that sense of oneness.

National integration is based on the fact that societies and individuals can only achieve their potential when living and working together. This is realized through the regulation and reconciliation of differences, competing interests and demand.

National integration entails constructing an integrated citizenry with a sense of belonging amongst members of different groups and religions of a country. It encompasses the values of unity, equality, freedom, democracy, peace, social justice and rule of law. The indicators of a cohesive society include:

- Common vision and sense of belonging
- Peaceful coexistence among all members
- Appreciation and value for people's diverse background and circumstances
- Similar life opportunities for those from different backgrounds
- Strong and positive relationships developed between people from different backgrounds. (Chege, 2016)

In another submission, Obinelo (2018) asserts that national integration in the Nigerian context is the acceptance of other ethnic components of Nigeria into the nationhood of Nigeria. It emphasises the Nigerian dream, agenda and components. National integration in Nigeria talks about being in one accord and understanding the gains to achieve the unity of the country. It is being able to accept other ethnic groups as one people, irrespective of religion, status, culture and geographical location.

One Nigeria means living as one people and making sure everyone shares the true identity of one nation. It speaks more of unity and letting people embrace others as part and parcel of Nigeria, without seeing them as inferiors or superiors but as people who have the same fundamental rights under the law of Nigeria. This is ingrained into the Nigerian motto - Unity and Faith, Peace and Progress.

The Indigenous Languages and National Integration

Having realised the enormous challenges that the ethnic and religious diversities imposed on the well-being and unity of the nation, the government adopted a series of measures, one of which is the provision in section 15 (4) of 1979 constitution which states that: The state shall foster a feeling of belonging and involvement among the peoples of the federation. The government is conscious of the problems the diversity of the nation imposes on national unity and hence the attempt at promoting national unity through language. Thus, it states in the National Policy Education (NPE 1985) that:

> In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process and as a means of preserving the people's culture, the Government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother-tongue.

Here, the intention of Government is to promote national unity through the three major indigenous languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Also, Section 57 of the 1999 constitution elevated the three major languages to national languages. This position, however, did not go down well with ethno-linguists.

Shobomehin (2002) observes that the political survival of Nigeria would be seriously threatened if any one of these languages was promoted by the government as being the national language. Ogbonna (1990) also warns that for a Lingua Franca to evolve in Nigeria, one does not adopt one of the three major languages because to do so is to cause chaos deliberately.

It is, therefore, obvious that the three major languages cannot engender national integrity because of the native attitude towards them. There is also the strong belief that no minority language can be adopted as national language. This is because if the minority ethnic group could not achieve success in such constitutional guarantee provisions as equitable distribution of resources, fair job placement, etc., is it in the volatile and political charged language questions?

The English Language and National Integration

English, though a foreign language, is adopted as Nigeria's official language. It is accorded the official status in Section 51 of the 1979 constitution and Section 97 of 1999 constitution, although this position has come under serious criticism. Irrespective of the sentiments that the continuous use of English as a national language in Nigeria elicits, there is no doubt that it serves our national interest more than any indigenous Nigerian language and, hence, it has come to stay.

Ajiegbe (1987) states that the English language is culturally neutral and in the context of Nigeria, it cuts across ethnic divides. It is therefore vital to the development of Nigeria and the components of any group and thus prevents any form of ethnic division. The adoption of English has bridged the communication gaps that would have existed among Nigerians.

The National Policy on Education (NPE 1985) outlines one of the objectives of the English language in Nigeria to include fostering national unity. Monday and Eze (2012) note that where there is diversity of languages, one common form stands out as a unifying medium. In Nigeria, English serves as a unifying and integrating factor.

National integration is based on the fact that societies and individuals can only achieve their potential when living and working together. This is realized through the regulation and reconciliation of differences, competing interests and demand. The English language, thus, serves as the regulatory device in the country. The absence of a common

language in a community or society portends chaos and disorder, as in the building of the Tower of Babel.

The English language can, therefore, be used to establish an efficient network of communication in the country where new ideas and techniques are passed to the populace. Through the use of English for communication, information will be passed to the citizenry. In this way, ignorance, superstition, suspicion, hunger, disease and other social needs which threaten the stability of the nation can be eradicated.

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying the fact that the Nigerian government recognises and appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting interaction and national integration. There is no doubt that Nigeria as a nation, from the early days of independence, till date, has been passing through troubled times, often occasioned by cultural, religious and language differences. These security threats are inimical to the peace and stability of the nation. Ever since the creation of this country out of diverse peoples, cultures, histories and geographies, Nigeria had had her differences and conflicts, and early in her history, had tried to resolve those differences through negotiations and compromise. It is the view of this paper, therefore, that since this country was built originally out of negotiations by sectional groups and leaders through the use of the language of the colonialists, the belief then is that, to achieve any national unity, the present generation is still capable of negotiations and compromises for the greater good of the country. And this can only be possible via the English language, thus strengthening English language in Nigeria for national integration.

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