

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES: NEGLECTED TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper x-rayed how indigenous languages can be used as a tool for sustainable development in Nigeria. The materials used for this study were sourced from textbooks and scholarly articles in journals. These materials were analysed through descriptive linguistic approach to arrive at its conclusion and recommendations. From the study, it was noted that there is a strong synergy between indigenous languages and sustainable development strategy. The paper concluded that indigenous languages foster self discovery, pride and cultural developments which are key to sustainable development and that lack of usage of indigenous languages stunts human creativity for development. The study then recommends amongst other things that, indigenous technologists should be resource persons to teach practicals to students in indigenous languages and that the alienation of learners from their communities should be strongly discouraged since they are the bedrock of our sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is comprised of different people of diverse descents, histories, cultures and more remarkably, languages. Irrespective of the number of indigenous languages posited by scholars, the language situation in Nigeria and the question of ethnicity in the country are complex issues. This has led to the use of English as a second language in Nigeria with its several functions in the country. It is the official Language predominantly used in government, schools, international relations, courts of law and the print and electronic media. The relevance of English in international relationship between people of different ethnic groups is also quite significant because one would wonder how a Hausa person would have been able to communicate with an Igbo or Yoruba person but for the availability of the English Language.

Different Scholars have divergent views on prominence or the advantages given to the use of English Language in the country over our indigenous languages. Some have argued that there would not have been need for such but for the "colonial masters'" amalgamation of the different ethnic groups in the country. But some scholars argued that several nations in the world today have the need to communicate with one another without having gone through the experience of amalgamation in their history. For long, English language has been Nigeria's official language. Some people express disgust at this language situation from the perspective of neo-colonialism. Even after fifty-eight years of independence and despite the fact that majority of Nigerians are not literate, English Language still remains the lingua franca in Nigeria.

Generally, it is very rare to see policy makers relate issues of development to language since the latter is seen purely as no more than an instrument of communication. But the link between language and development is more fundamental than that. If human beings can explore, discover and extend knowledge through their languages, and also if exploration, discovery and extension of frontiers of knowledge are the prerequisites for social development, the indigenous languages of The Third World Countries must be well organized and developed for sustainable development. Thus, a discussion on positive development of The Third World Nations through their language resources has also to stir-up discussions about the positive cultural resources; activities, thoughts and attitudes of people of the nations. This is what informs this study: Indigenous Languages for Sustainable Development Strategy in Nigeria.

The study observes the prospect of indigenous languages in sustainable development strategy in The Third World Countries with particular reference to Nigeria. It seeks to explicate and analyse the topic with the view to argue specifically on the place of indigenous languages for sustainable development strategy in Nigeria.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The concept of language

More than anything else, the concept of language sets man apart from the animal world. It is uniquely a human feature that defines human communicative existence which gives essence to man's overall being. It is commonly believe that language is used variously to achieve specific goals and intentions. To define language, it is not an easy or a straightforward task because it means different things to different people. The psychologists for example see language as a key to the understanding of the mind, while to the philosophers; it is an imperfect and misleading code for expressing logical ideas. From their own perspective, the literary critic sees it as a medium of literature.

According to Nwagu and Nwoke, (2002), linguists have made several attempts in providing a generally accepted definition of the concept of language. Sapir (1921), puts language as a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating desires, ideas and emotions by means of voluntary produced symbols. In his own view, Hall (1968) sees language as the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols. Concurring with Hall, Farinde and Ojo (2005) view language as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates. To McArthur (1996:523), "Language is a human system of communication which uses structured vocal sounds and can be embodied in other media such as writing, print and physical sign". This means that it is a means with which human beings communicate with one another. All these scholarly views on language treat it as purely human institution and the term 'institution' makes it explicit the view that the language that is used by a particular society is a part of that society's culture.

No matter how divergent these definitions by scholars may look like, they share some common traits or elements. Central to all of these is the fact that language consists of a system of symbols or sounds. This implies that it is made up of patterns or structures, which combine in definite ways to produce meaning. Again, these definitions lay the fact that language is a means of communication. Human beings have a whole lot of ways of communicating non-verbally like nods, smiles, frowns, handshakes, kisses and other gestures, but by far, the most prominent form of human communication is speech and language.

Language as a socio-cultural phenomenon has a serious implication not just because of its communicative role but more because of its place as an index of group identity. This is why Akindele and Adegbite (1999) say that, language is a necessary condition and an important factor for national unity and it is the greatest tradition which provides the common identity of people.

Language as a concept, does not stand apart from human experience in life, it is a guide and regulator of social reality. The language use in everyday life powerfully conditions all our thinking about social activities and problems. Therefore, it is thinking in futility to imagine that one can adjust to reality and everyday experiences in life without the use of language. In other words, it can be said that a person's experience of reality is largely dependent upon the language habits that are found within a particular society.

The concept of national development

Development, as a concept has gained wider recognition from all nooks and crannies in the world. This is not unconnected to its monumental relevance to man and his society. As a result of its germane nature, the concept has attracted divergent meanings to different people. According to Rodney (1969), development is a many sided process. At the level of individual, development implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self discipline, responsibility and material well being. An individual or society that moves positively from one cadre to the other is said to be developed. Development is a multidimensional process involving the re-organisation and re-orientation of the entire economy and social system. This means improvement in income and output, radical change in institutional, social and administrative structures as well as the popular attitudes, customs and beliefs of a people. Development involves both a physical process and the mind. Alams and Dang (2010), view development as a change towards pattern of society that allows better realisation of human values that allow a society's greater control over its environment and over its political destiny. This enables its citizens to gain increased control over them.

The commonest means of measuring development is in the economic terms of GDP and capital formation. While the GDP may sometimes cover up the lopsidedness in the wealth distribution among a population, Seidman (1976:49) claims that development should be based on: "... an analysis of the spread of productivity and increased levels of living of the broad masses of the population." His claim is further confirmed by the World Bank Report of 1989 which says that measuring development in terms of human-centred social indicators such as basic health services, food, education and life expectancy reflects more accurately the condition of most the population of a country because of their broader distribution across households.

National development means the advancement in economic, social and polity of a nation which enables such a nation to realise its potentials. This equally involves the various plans set up by a government aimed at improving the quality of life of a people. In the view of Aziza (1998), national development entails a gradual advancement or improvement or growth through progressive changes in the body polity of a nation and in the life of the individuals that make up the nation. He adds that national development has to do with moving the nation forward so that it can serve its citizenry better.

The issue of national development is not limited to some specific areas as a large proposition of Nigerians erroneously believes, but involves every aspect of national life. What constitutes national development should not be restricted to the infrastructure alone but to the total improvement, growth of the society and the citizenry, liberty freedom, self actualisation, self-expression, per-capita income, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), etc. Ikara (1982) says 'real development can only be achieved by involving the people in the process, not as spectators but as active and decisive participants. Kazi (1989) on his own part views national development as an advancement from a low level to high level of political, social, economic, scientific and technological maturity and organised society. Language is key or fundamental to development because it is the only road to thinking (Sapir, 1921), which makes human thinking possible. Afolayan (1994) concurs with Sapir that language makes the pooling together of human capacities for social development inevitable. As the key to the heart of the people and consequently their knowledge and treasures (Engholm, 1965), one could extrapolate from Whorf's claim to assume that sociolinguistic structure influences people's development of their society especially, in their indigenous languages.

THE LANGUAGE POLICY IN NIGERIA AND ITS CHALLENGES

Planning is a conscious control of human enterprise to achieve certain goals. The Nigerian government has had enthusiasm in planning especially in certain aspects of the national economy like trade, agriculture, communication, construction of oil refineries, etc. But regarding a language policy upon which the future greatness of the country depends on, very little is done. By language policy, it means what government does either through legislation, court decisions or policy to

determine how languages are used, cultivate language skills needed to meet national priorities or establish the rights of individual or groups to use and maintain language.

The Nigerian Language Policy placed more emphasis on language of education. It states that a child takes instructions in his mother-tongue or an indigenous language of the wider communication in his area of domicile in the first three years primary school and thereafter, English (National Policy on Education, 1981). The policy added that at the junior and secondary levels, the child is required to study languages. That is, his mother-tongue (if available for study) or an indigenous language of wider communication in his area of domicile and any of the major indigenous languages of Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, provided the language chosen is distinct from the child's mother tongue. In the language policy document, no specific language for education at the tertiary level is suggested or prescribed so English is used. Although some other indigenous languages like Edo, Idoma, Kanuri, Fulfude, Ibibio, Ijaw, Tiv and Nupe were suggested to be allowed to feature in the country's school system, it has not been practically obtainable in the country.

The language policy in Nigeria and other Third World Countries has little positive impact on sustained national development as a result of various factors. One of such is the poor or non-implementation of policies generally (Adegbiya, 1994, Bambose, 1994) and second is that, policies are not well formulated as they do not fully take into consideration the diverse interests and attitudes of the diverse population of Nigeria (Afolayan, 1997, Brann 1977, Fafunwa 1982 and Adegbiya 1994). When policies are poorly formulated, they cannot have any impact on the society whatever the amount of implementation efforts applied to them.

One of the problems that can be identified in the language policy in Nigeria is the dominance of the colonial language (English) and the three ethnic languages (Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba). In policy English is identified as the national language of politics. Although the three major languages – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are mentioned, the policy shows that they are not yet capable of performing this role. The other minority languages in the country are not mentioned at all. In the policy also, English is rated higher politically than the indigenous languages at the state level, even when it is glaring that the latter will be more suitable in some states, e.g.; Hausa in the Northern states. The policy has the major ethnic languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba upgraded for nationalistic reasons of achieving unity and cultural preservation. The policy engenders ethnic domination, and has not gone down well with the majority groups. Although the policy allows the use of the three major indigenous languages in education, they are only restricted to the lower level of the system in which nowadays, schools do not give the consideration. This has shown that indigenous languages are inadequate for education beyond the first two or three years of primary school.

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN THE MIDST OF LANGUAGE POLICIES IN SOME THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES

The language policy in most Third World Countries is such that some select one major indigenous language for use as national or official language while other languages serve various functions. For instance, Swahili language in Tanzania, Kirundi in Burundi, Somali in Somalia, Amharic in Ethiopia, and Arabic in Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Sudan. In Tanzania for example, the smallness of over hundred different ethno linguistic units assisted the selection of Swahili, a neutral language that has developed via trade inter-communication between people. The case in Nigeria is such that, a foreign language (English) as well as one or more indigenous languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are extolled over and above other 'minority' languages. In Sierra Leone; English and Creole, in Kenya; English and Swahili and in South Africa; English and Afrikaans.

Language policies in The Third World Countries do not favour their indigenous languages as resources of sustainable development. Even in few nations in Africa where African languages serve official functions, such languages are mere lingual francas or Languages of Wider Communication (LWC) but serve limited functions in formal education. In other Third World Countries, the dominant

use of foreign languages as elaborated codes is glaring, while the indigenous languages are either absent or serve restricted functions. For example, in Nigeria and Ghana, English serves as the official language while Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba serve as language of wider communication (Nigeria) and Akan, Moshi-Dagomba and Ewe (Ghana). These are the majority indigenous languages in these countries. In Addition, these and all other minority indigenous languages are assigned minor roles as media of instruction at the lower rung of the educational system with Pidgin English as lingua franca of low status.

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY IN NIGERIA

It is no more news that languages are not just vehicles of national development but they are one of the components of development. Successive governments in Nigeria had launched various development plans for the country like Vision 2000, Vision 2010, Vision 2012, National Industrial Revolution plan in 2014, Nigeria Infrastructure Master Plan and the current Economic Recovery and Growth plan of President Buhari. Of all these development plans, the role indigenous languages can play as a vehicle in attaining and sustaining these flowery development plans is related to the background and hence most of them had become a mirage.

For any true sustainable development strategy in the country, indigenous languages are very pivotal. Aziza (1999) suggests that indigenous language studies can be used to bring out information on such areas as traditional medicine, food technology and so on. Traditional food preservation is one area that can be harnessed through proper language study. These processes of food preservation should be taught in indigenous languages in such a practical way that the children will internalise and be able to apply them. If our indigenous languages are studied by all pupils in the primary and secondary schools through proper, goal oriented study, many will be exposed to our indigenous technology. This will lead to mass production and consequently, sustained national development will be achieved.

Similarly, linguists and national planners should make provision at the tertiary level of education for students to embark on practical projects in the various indigenous languages with a view of tapping the innovative ideas of our indigenous experts in various fields. Since most of the experts are illiterates and cannot speak English, a good knowledge of our indigenous languages is important in getting information from these experts. Ali, kaul and Atala (1991) in a study on milk processing by Fulani women in Kaduna, Northern Nigeria report that majority of the women interviewed had earlier had neither western nor Koranic education. This means that only an improved study of the Hausa/Fulani Languages embodying traditional milk production skill can preserve as well as improve on this process.

Since most experts in our indigenous technologies cannot speak English, only an improved strategy plan and study of these languages can ensure the sustenance and survival of such technologies. Nigeria's problem does not lie in the non-existence of an indigenous national language, rather it stems from the relegation of our indigenous languages, which embody our local technologies. When an improved study on our indigenous technologies is put in place, it will enable them to compete favourable with those of the West. Through more researches and improved study of the various indigenous languages, our local technologies will be developed and sustained.

For the avoidance of doubt, going down memory lane will show that all the technologically advanced nations in the world attest to the fact that none of them used a borrowed language in their technological advancement, none of them used a borrowed language in their technological advancement, even though most of them were dominated at a point in time by other powers at one time or the other in their history. Take the English language as an example, its history showed that some centuries back, it had not always occupied the enviable position of a world language that it employs today. It was the language of the social inferior class, an uncultivated language; in the same light in which many Nigerians presently regard their own languages. Similarly, the Japanese

who are in the fore front of electronics and technology today did not give up their indigenous language in order to develop. This is why Aziza (1999) says that we should not continue to compound the Nigerian learner's problem by expecting him to cope with both learning new skills as well as a new language (English). According to him, this will certainly make the acquisition of the new skills unnecessarily difficult for the learner. In the like manner, Indonesia, which some years ago were at the same level of development as Nigeria, is today becoming a nation to be reckoned with technologically. But they have not left their indigenous language behind. Our case in Nigeria is that we have spent so many decades running after foreign (English) and technology to the neglect of our own.

Majority of Nigerians erroneously believed that national development and its sustenance means sole development in the style of western countries and in how well we can imbibe foreign technology and language. While it is true that we need foreign technology since no nation exists in isolation, our need of them should be to complement and improve on what we have, not replace ours. As earlier said, language is the most important tool with which society is organised and it is hardly possible to talk of national development without including the indigenous languages with which the people formulate their thoughts, ideas and needs.

According to Aziza (1999), developing Nigerian languages and encouraging their use educationally and society, we enhance our self-image and the status of these languages, and understand fully the environment which we live. This certainly would help us realise the best potential in us. Nigeria's sustainable development should embrace the totality of our national life, our language inclusive. Finally, by involving our local or indigenous languages in the implementation of programme of the country will not only enable the local people to be confident to participate in the discussions and activities of our local economy, it would instill the qualities that are vital in fighting poverty in the country.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, attempt has been geared towards drawing conclusion on the need to use indigenous languages for sustainable development strategy in Nigeria. The study therefore concludes that the need to adopt indigenous languages for sustainable development strategy in Nigeria will foster self discovery, pride and cultural development. The paper adopts a position that the underdevelopment and underutilization of indigenous languages in Nigeria and other third world countries have stunted the creative potentials of most young members of these countries and thus have prevented them from benefiting from or utilizing positive experiences from their rich traditional culture for sustainable national development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is obvious from the study that there is a synergy between indigenous languages and sustainable development. It is against this background that the paper recommends the following:

1. The government of Nigeria and other Third World Countries rather than waiting to import huge and expensive technical equipment and manpower for their technical workshops in schools, they should employ the services of indigenous technologists like the mechanics, welders, carpenters, iron benders, blacksmiths, electrician and other artisans to teach practical to their students. These teachings should be done in the indigenous languages because the child learns faster technological skills in his/her indigenous languages than any that is align to him/her.
2. The development and used of indigenous languages in Nigeria should not be left in the hands of government alone but organised cultural organisations, local planning authorities and individual scholars, linguists, religious bodies, media practitioners and publishers should encourage technological works in indigenous languages.

3. The alienation of the child from his/her community for further studies abroad should be de-emphasized. This is because it alienates the learner from his/her indigenous languages and local industries.

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