The Role of Indigenous Language in National Development: A Critical Analysis

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Introduction

Language and its relationship to development theory are estranged in the sea of discourse discussing the best route for Nigeria's poverty amelioration. This is peculiar given that Nigeria is a multilingual nation speaking some 400 languages (Robinson, 1990). Almost as a quick-fix solution to this daunting diversity, most leaderships at independence decided to make the colonial language the official language of national communication, administration and medium of education from early primary school up to university level. Some scholars highlight the prominence of this strategy: "…the majority of countries in Africa have adopted an exoglossic language policy, in that they rely heavily on an ex-colonial

language for their official or national communication. Only a small percentage of nations use an indigenous language, either exclusively or dominantly in their formal functions" (Batibo, 2006).

Politics such as this have dominated since independence and have created a situation where it is accepted that ex-colonial languages are those of status and superiority, and that African language including Nigeria as a case study are restricted to the informal sectors. At the very heart of the problem is the fact that the majority of people in Nigeria have no mastery of English or French because in order to learn them, one must go to school, and given the infancy of the poverty of the African education system, Nigeria in particular, many have no opportunity to do so. Even a fortune school attendance is not guaranteed fluency, however, since this will probably require a pupil to complete (at least) primary school. With the high drop-out rates of Nigerian children due to economic or familiar restraints, this is far from assured. This situation is condusive to the creation of an elite who have had access to and completed both primary and secondary school as Bamgbose writes: "since the imported official language is spread through the educational process and education was, and still is, largely restricted to a few, the population came to be divided into an elite that could speak the official language and the masses that were illiterate" (Bamgbose, 1991). Herein lies the basis of this research work question – the seemingly insurmountable gulf in power between a ruling elite and the masses they ignore is seen here as one of, if not the major impediment to Nigerian development. Does empowering minority language speakers, precisely through their language offer an alternative path to installing democratic principles and processes at all levels of the society, most importantly, at

the very grassroots? In this way, can linguistic diversity be used to aid the developmental process, not stunned as an inconvenient drain on resources and a divisive reality? Indigenous language is explored here as a tool, not a solution (and this tempering is key), to facilitating stronger, more participatory democratic cultures in Nigeria where people must be accorded greater rights in the political processes of their fatherland, before they will see their standard of living improved and human rights adhered to (Sen, 2000).

It makes little sense in a country of such amazing linguistic diversity that language policies that shut this amazing resource out have persisted so long. Instead, government employs current language policy based on the positive rhetoric that exoglossic language dominance enables access to the language of globalization and modernity and is therefore an economically (and thus developmentally) beneficial policy. In truth, such rhetoric contrasts spectacularly with the country's economic flights. It is in the face of poverty dubious democratic practice and a disenfranchised and expendable majority that the language question must be accorded the time, resources and materials by development think-tanks, donors' organizations and heads of state.

Definition of Terms

Here, certain terminologies which are vital to the topic of this paper will be considered thus:

Indigenous Language

Indigenous languages are the tribal, native or local languages spoken. The language would be from a linguistically distinct community that has been settled in the area for many generations. Indigenous languages are not necessarily national languages and the reverse also true. There are about 400 (four hundred) indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria and only few of these languages have written forms (Adeniyi and Bello, 2006). Grimes (2000) reported that there are about 500 languages in Nigeria. These languages comprise both minority and majority languages as well as some few non-Nigeria languages such as: English, Arabic and French. Among these languages, three (3) are considered as major by the 1999 constitution of Nigeria. The major indigenous languages are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. It must be noted that these languages have acquired their majority status solely on the demographic strength of their speakers and not because of any inherent qualities they possess that the other languages lack (Idem, 2002).

More than one third (1/3) of the Nigerian population are illiterates and live in the rural areas, they neither understand nor speak English (Ayibo, 2012), the official language of Nigeria. Despite the importance of language as a reservoir of culture, unfortunately, indigenous languages in Nigeria are often neglected as in every use i.e., in the media and educational policies to the benefit of the foreign "colonial" languages in Nigeria (Amfani, 2010).

Sustainable National Development

Although, some writers see the concept of sustainable national development as an economic one (Essien, 2003, Aron, 1967), this paper strongly believe that, as much as economy plays a major role in sustainable national development, other indices, such as unity, education, mass participation in government activities, maintaining law and order equally have tangible roles to play in promoting the industrial state of a nation. It is not wrong to state that even with a buoyant economy, a state or nation must still ensure that the indices highlighted above to have a meaningful sustainable national development. It is therefore, believed that sustainable national development is the aggregate financial buoyancy as well as the education of and involvement of the citizenry in activities that will lead to the nourishing of a country's economy.

These factors aid the development of any nation, both overtly and covertly. Development is (or ought to be) the path to creating more accountable and transparent government, whose future generation relies on them listening to, and providing for their population. This means taking into account those marginalized, those at the very grassroots levels of society and building better, regular and more meaningful means of communications and decision making with the bodies that have the power to affect their lives. Sen (2000) says that development "is a process whereby great "freedoms" are sought for the majority within the society, based on the understanding that the greater freedom an individual has, the more developed that society must be". Also, development has to be more concerned with enhancing the lives we leave and freedoms we enjoy. Expanding the freedoms that we have reasons to value not only makes our lives richer but also allows us to be fuller social persons, exercising our own

volitions and interacting with and influencing the world in which we live.

Theoretical Framework

Here, the paper x-rays certain theories related to the topic of discourse which are thus:

Theory of Linguistic Citizenship

Stroud is amongst those who have developed the idea of "linguistic citizenship as a model for harnessing the benefits of indigenous language promotion. In essence, linguistic citizenship holds that top-down language policies instigated at the state-level are an intrinsically management-based approach and is doubtful that "tinkering with the economic nuts and bolts of programme design" will ever genuinely heighten the status of local languages and their speakers' plight (Stroud, 2001). What needs to be accepted is that it is minority groups themselves who are the only people who can use, and subsequently develop their own language. Fundamentally, this will only occur where they wish to do so. A language will become a source of empowerment only when a group chooses to speak and use it. A minority speaking group that itself chooses to educate successive generations through their own language, either formally or informally represents the antithesis to the state-led "linguistic right".

Framework, largely the work of Skutnabbkangas, which demands that a group be identified by and speak a specific language. For a group to truly be in power of its own development, it must use its own language and demand to do so. Language can allow the poorest people to acquire the

citizenship that would guarantee them participation in social, economic, cultural, judicial, political and development issues. In other words, greater attention to language can lead us on our path of enhancing democratic practices in developing societies, Groups who want this involvement must take it for themselves, beginning with language (Rubagumya, 2007). Linguistic citizenship also promotes indigenous languages as a way of harnessing the political development potential that is "waiting in the ranks" of Africa's diversity. It sees the site of this debate as a political struggle and it is when monitory groups recognize this and take issue with their marginalization – precisely through recourse to their language, that they begin to exercise their linguistic citizenship. Here, Stroud seems to be offering up the citizenship framework as an answer to the chasm that exists in Africa between government language policy and grassroots reality where in truth Language of Wider Communities are rarely used or mastered by minority group. It is ironic that we are discussing indigenous minority language yet on the continent it is the dominating, oppressive ex-colonial languages that are in fact, the minority in terms of number of speakers (Harber, 1997)

Linguistic citizenship sees it as given that language rights that cannot be given by a state, but must be taken by disenfranchised themselves. Perhaps a keener criticism is that Stroud's argument comes across as somewhat "pie" in the sky. Essentially, we have to ask how realistic a process of linguistic citizenship is to become on a continent-wide level. In reality, it will be harder for a community of disenfranchised minority language speakers to begin a process of creating orthography for their language. With what materials? Stroud here appears to be suggesting the possibility for resource-poor people with a history or disempowerment and a life on the

fringes of social and political participation simply to "decide" to end such a situation by choosing to speak their minority language remorselessly. Further, it seems somehow naïve to believe that the language question, particularly when we talk of its relationship to democratic principles so keenly, as done here, can be answered without recourse to the nation-state, government and attention to political processes.

Theory of Sociolinguistics of Communication Media

Leitner (2000) says that the sociolinguistics of communication media looks at media as a discourse. By this, he refers to the forms, structure and uses of language and other semiotic codes that are specific to the media. This goes beyond the examination of the content and forms of the "packages" to looking at the underlying cognitive systems that is the ideologies of media. To Leitner, events would not happen the way they do nor would they have the same impact as they have without language. They (i.e. events) are in themselves mirrors of reality while they inform, interpret, entertain and educate. In an attempt to locate media discourse formally and functionally, Leitner arrived at the following:

- Content moves from a source, the medium to a target.

- Communication may take place on a single or on several layers of access.

- The media get information in an already mediated form from an outside agency.

- Production of message is controlled by internal factors or bear upon its work from the work of the outside world.

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- They "design" messages for an audience.

In all, Leitner examined the different levels, domains and audience design of the mass media. For the purpose of this paper, we borrow Leitners submission of the impact the media ought to have on recipients. In his words, "in order to gain and maintain a stable audience, communication media must include recipients' need and expectations early on in message production. In this paper, a look at how far the mass media is able to take care of the recipients' need so much so that the citizenry, through it, become socially, economically and linguistically advanced. Being the model on which the study is partly anchored, therefore, we examine the Nigerian media in light of these above-mentioned ideas of the proponent.

Roles of Indigenous Language to National Development

• Enhancement of cognitive understanding: Firstly, experiences from Philippine, Mexico, Wales, Canada, Russia, Yugoslavia and Japan have shown that the indigenous languages are fit for all levels of education as effective media of instruction that is capable of eliminating pedagogical difficulties in learning and thereby enhancing better understanding. In fact, research results in the fields of education, linguistics, cognitive psychology and anthropology all agree that students who enter school with a primary language other than the national or dominant language perform significantly better on academic tasks when they receive consistent and cumulative academic support in the native heritage language (Harrison, & Bello, 2014). Linguists like Trudell (2007), and Brock-Utne (2000) stress that "education for all" development initiatives held so high by the World Bank and other bilateral donors are meaningless unless

the quality of the education received is also worked upon. More literature today maintains that any truly worthwhile educative programme or curriculum at the primary level should take place in a child's mother tongue; education that is relevant to a child's environment is far better than estranged curriculum based on foreign language. Bunyi (1999) cites the 1951 UNESCO report on language and education in support of this. The report states the psychological benefits along with sociological ones, namely that mother tongue education will help identification among members of the community to which a child belongs. Moreover, there are educational benefits in that children are said to learn faster through a familiar linguistic medium and thus cover more topics.

• Linguistic development: Secondly, linguistic development is seen here partly as the attainment of proper codification by a given language. In addition, the language must also be in constant use by its speakers. Most indigenous Nigerian languages are yet to be fully codified. Speakers of indigenous Nigeria languages must strive to have their languages codified. It is pertinent for speakers of non-codified languages to note that gone are the days when government codifies languages. This means that it is now the responsibility of ethnic communities to sponsor the codification of their languages. The codification will facilitate development on various fronts. Fully codified indigenous languages are taught in schools due to the availability of orthographies. The writing facility can allow native speakers of a language to put down their thoughts on paper and such documents will facilitate faster growth and development of the language. Linguistic development is the first step towards any other meaningful and desirable development. Scientific or technological development for example, cannot be attained by a people who are not

developed linguistically. All technologically developed nations and societies had attained optimum linguistic development prior to the scientific or technological developments.

• Enhancement of political development: Language and politics are inextricably linked. While analyzing language and politics, Barley (2004) reiterates that it would be difficult to identify any sphere of social or institutional life in which language does not play a pivotal role – from education, to religion, work to leisure, buying and selling etc. In recent times in the country, especially during the political era, the politicians and campaigners do what they call "door-to'door step campaign" in the various villages, wards and zones etc trying to mobilize the eligible voters or electorates to vote for them using indigenous language and such helps the party to win the heart of the voters. Sen (2000) infers that accepting and appreciating the cultural and social value of indigenous tongues, and incorporating them more formally into political and educational sectors is a means by which individuals can effectively shape their own destiny. He further explains that at present, so many people find themselves subservient to a system which limits their potential through denying them the use of their mother tongue outside the informal sector. Lending his support, the chairman of Senate Committee on Housing, Lands and Urban Development, Senator Gbenga Ashafa emphasized the significance of indigenous languages, noting that if well harnessed, the language of each ethnic group in Nigeria "is critical to realizing the national development goals". Ashafa adds that the language of each tribe should be held sacrosanct for the nation to compete with other developed countries in the world. In his own view, Mu'azu (2014) states that we must accept the potentials of

indigenous language for domestication of knowledge and broad-based grass-root reach as against the English language. If English brings unity, local dialects (of indigenous languages) hold the key to development.

• Transmission of culture: Anyanwu (2007) argues that "the indigenous language (L1) of a child carries its culture with it, hence educating the child in it, gives the child the opportunity to be part of the cultural orientation of his L1. Thus, a child whose early education is acquired through the use of his L1 does not get alienated from the cultural values embedded in his L1". The assertion shows that indigenous language is used for transmitting indigenous knowledge. For examples, some Igbo rhymes and songs could be used to teach morals and cultural values as part of indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is native to a region hence environmentally based as well as orally transmitted. This assertion is true because an individual naturally acquires his or her indigenous language with little or no effort. Every normal child is born with the language acquisition device (LAD) which enables him or her to acquire basic knowledge about the nature and structure of the language to which he or she is exposed to right from infancy.

Conclusion

This so far examined why and how indigenous Nigerian languages should be employed in teaching science and technology-based subjects in our educational system through codification. This does not mean that the use of English as educational medium should be discontinued, rather, what the paper is advocating is that both should be officially approved (i.e. English and indigenous), and that indigenous languages

should be developed and adopted accordingly, as classroom media with consequent provision of scientific books in both languages. If this is done possibly Nigeria's dream for sustainable development in various sectors (social, political, educational and communication) of the economy nation would become a reality.

Recommendations

As we have seen the importance of indigenous languages form the developed countries cited in their paper in both their transformation and development of a country. The paper therefore recommends that:

• Codification of the various indigenous languages should be undertaken. This is a herculean task for the government alone to shoulder the responsibility of codification i.e. orthography, producing reading materials, grammar, dictionaries and so on, the linguistic groups should assist in getting at least an orthography for their languages.

• Parents should change their attitude towards the indigenous languages, the notion that it is only through the colonial master's language that one can progress in life has to be discarded. Countries such as: Japan, China, Russia, Germany and others have progressed using their indigenous languages.

• The Nigeria Policy on Education should not be on paper alone. School inspectors and all stakeholders are to be involved in making sure that the language policy is followed to the vetter. In fact, indigenous language learning should not be left at the primary school. It should be encouraged even at the tertiary institutions.

• The teaching and learning of indigenous languages should be made interesting with the use of new technologies and strategies. Parents should speak to their children in their various indigenous languages. They should not rely on the language of the immediate community (if not their indigenous language). All languages have their uses and prestige which only the speakers of the language can portray.

• Indigenous languages can be made richer by finding ways of including new science and technology terms in the languages. This will disabuse the minds of those who believe that it is only English that has means to explain such concepts.

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