

Language, Culture and National Identity

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Abstract

This paper discusses the terms language and culture and appraises their roles in the achievement of National Identity. It looks at the problems facing Nigeria as a multi-lingual country with multiplicity of languages and cultures. The work further examines the impossibility the realization of the WAZOBIA project as a means of achieving language cohesion in the country. It probes into the modality for evolving a workable national language and eliminating distrust and the tendency to publicize the nation's linguistic phenomena. Is there any possibility of making linguistic behaviour effectively

synchronize/grammar with societal behaviour in order to chart a smooth National course? It therefore upholds the use of the English language; the language of our colonial masters, only as an interim measure, for communication and general acceptability pending when a consensus and neutral language will be introduced for national identity. The paper encourages the sustenance of national symbols of identity like the National Identity Card, National Flag, common constitution and laws which will help foster unity among the multi-ethnic groups in the country.

Introduction

Language is a means through which a group of people organizes their experiences and thoughts. A growing child learns to order his thoughts and react to habits about his environment through language. Hornby, (1977) describes language as a human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, feelings and desires by means of system of sounds and sound symbols (p. 473).

Language is the pre-requisite for the accumulation and transmission of culture. Language itself is part of culture. Culture is the total way of life of a people. This includes their tradition, environment, and how they harness it, their diet, music, dance, folklores, language and world view. Language is inseparable from culture and both of them make up the identity of a particular nation. Prah, (1993) (2006) states:

Language is the essential matrix and facilitator in the development and growth of culture as a process. It articulates the material transformations in the social process and mediates between humans in their

relationship with nature...
language registers culture and
culture elaborates language.
Language dialectically
encodes and decodes; it
constructs and deconstructs.
Reality is its object and
homosapiens, its object (p.
12).

When a language dies, a whole lot of experiences die with it. It represents an incredible loss of diversity, culture and identity for people across the country. Nigeria with its numerous language groups has been confronted with the problem of adopting a national language.

The facto National Policy on Languages (in Education): provides for:

- i) Mother-Tongue (MT) and/or language of the immediate community (LIC) as the language of initial literacy at the pre-primary and junior primary levels and of adult and non-formal education.
- ii) English the official language as the language of formal literacy, the bureaucracy, secondary and higher education, the law courts, etc.

The Policy advocates

- i) Multilingualism as the national goal
- ii) Recognizes English as the de facto official language in the bureaucracy and all tiers of formal education.
- iii) Treats Hausa Igbo and Yoruba as potential national languages which are to be developed and used as L1 and L2 all through the formal educational system.
- iv) All Nigerian languages as meaningful media of instruction in initial literacy, and in life-long and non-formal education.

However, none of the indigenous languages has been adopted as a national language, perhaps for fear of cultural assimilation.

This paper will among other things, x-ray how much language and culture have synergized to achieve National identity. It does this by throwing light on the concept of language and culture, nation and national identity, the role of language and culture in the life of a nation, language, culture and national identity; it finally makes recommendations for the nation to move ahead.

Language

Language is a social behaviour. Through language, the social tradition and norms of behaviour are transmitted and maintained. According to Sapir (1966), “Language is a purely, human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols” (p. 21). Language is a medium of communication between two people or a group of people. The Encyclopaedia Britannica, (1975) defines language as an arbitrary system of vocal symbols by means of which human kind, as members of social group and participants in a culture interact and communicate (p. 642).

By inference, language is a phenomenon that is produced by man’s vocal system for communication purposes. In Smith’s (1969) assertion, “language is a learned, shared and arbitrary system of vocal symbols through which human beings in the same speech community or sub-culture interact and hence communicate in terms of their common cultural experiences and expectations (p. 104). The above definition suggests that language as a learned phenomenon is peculiar to a particular speech community, or people that share the same culture.

Womack, (2001:154) as cited in Omego, (2007:169), defines language as “the human ability to encode culturally

defined meanings in sound and to combine units of sound to generate infinite new meanings through the application of rules. The above definition lays emphasis not only on men's unique ability to use language but also on the essence of rules in language use, for language is rule governed.

In the words of Aja Akpuru Aja (2008)

Language is the most important information and communication characteristics of all human beings. Language is power. Language is a weapon for cultural preservation. Only humans have spoken and written languages. True, other animals can communicate with sounds, gestures, touch and smell, but the meanings of these signals are fixed. Language consists of learned symbols or codes that represent something else... the most useful and flexible symbols remain written or spoken words. These words can be combined according to grammatical rules to express need, fear, vision, mission and security (p. 2).

It is glaring that language is for human beings. It makes use of symbols and codes and the words used in a language express cultural values and norms. For humans, language gives access to the social experience and accumulated knowledge of generations that have gone before, and projects into the future. Njemanze, (2008), describes language as:

One of the fundamental primordial expressions of cultural differences is spoken language identifies and distinguishes a group of people that speak that language from other human races. Language has social relevance. It stands as the basis for social action; it facilitates inter-personal and inter-ethnic cooperation; this makes language part of man and culture.

Most languages operate in association with their own recurrent pattern which is meaningful to native speakers. These speakers

have similar linguistic features like syntax, semantics, phonetics and phonology. They also do not operate in isolation but within a cultural setting. This affirms the fact that language is culture based and culture is language. Culture cannot survive without language, which is the only vehicle for cultural propagation and transmission. In the same vein, culture enriches language, thus both concepts are intrinsically connected.

Culture: A Conceptual Review

Culture is a totality of people's way of life which runs through the activities of a people and differentiates them from other people. Hornby, (2000), defines culture as a way of life and social organization of a particular community or group, the beliefs and attitude about something that people in a particular group or organization share" (pg. 284).

Culture is embracing; it is a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom, law and other behaviours that man can acquire, as a member of a society.

According to Geertz (1975):

Culture is a network (transmitted historically) of meanings embedded in symbols, a system of ideas inherited and expressed in the form of symbols, by which means people communicate, perpetuate and stretch their knowledge concerning their attitude towards life. (pg. 89).

Culture is perceived as a way of life, encompassing all human efforts and achievements and the attitudes or behaviour at work. It manifests in a people's religion, language, philosophy, music, dance, drama, architecture, political organization, technology, education, values, knowledge system, legal or judicial organization, and morality (Anyanwu, U.D, 2006:2).

Culture is the prevailing techniques by which people maintain themselves within their environment. It therefore represents the pool of ideas, goals, means and products of man in society; serves as man's social conscience, and represents the basis of consensus within a given human community or social order. The way we behave in our relationships with other human beings in the society is governed and determined largely by our culture. In addition to the actual ways in which we behave, there are certain tendencies in us to feel and act in certain ways (attitude) to possess certain yardstick or measures of goodness and desirability (values); and to define worthy attainments (goals). These attitudes, values and goals are part of our culture. Culture is socially learned and shared. It is also handed down from generation to generation as a tradition. (Ofoegbu, 1982: 212).

Every culture is dynamic, that is, to say that every culture changes and is not static. As a culture comes into contact with other cultures, and as it passes from one generation to another, it is modified through the addition of new modes of behaviours, and by discarding completely some patterns of thought and earlier accepted as ways of doing things. Culture goes together with socialization because it is through socialization that people learn about their culture; identifying themselves with the goals and aspirations of their society; acquire basic skills needed for maintaining themselves within their environment, and learn to relate to other cultures. Nigeria, as a multi-lingual country, is made up of diverse cultures.

Nation and National Identity

A nation has been described as "A country considered as a group of people with the same language, culture and history, who live in a particular area under one government. It is a large community of people associated with a particular territory, usually speaking a single language and usually having a political character or political aspiration. (Hornby, 2000:780).

National identity therefore refers to those central or general features which one can identify as being common to the whole nation or country or features that form the characteristics of a nation. Such features could either be linguistic or cultural.

National Identity is the sense of a nation as a cohesive whole, as represented by distinctive traditions, culture, language and politics. A person's national identity as his/her identity and sense of belonging to one state or to one nation, a feeling one shares with a group of people, regardless of one's legal citizenship status.

National identity is not an inborn trait, it results directly from the presence of elements from the "common points" in people's daily lives: national symbols, language, national colours, the nation's history national consciousness, blood ties, culture, music, cuisine, radio, television, etc (<https://en.m.wikipedia>).

The Role of Language and Culture in the Life of a Nation

From what has been written above, the important role of language and culture in the life of a nation and its people need not be over-emphasized. Culture remains the foundation for effective socialization. It could be in the form of citizenship training and education. Language on its part is a channel through which culture is communicated to the people. Language functions as a political weapon. No human society can exist without language and a people with identical language and culture command a lot of respect and influence on the scheme of things in the world, thus language is a symbol of social and national identity. Where people are unable to interact linguistically, chaos will set in. This is the fundamental cause of all the ethnic clashes and other crises in Nigeria. Lack of or too little communication among the various groups causes distrust.

This paper subsequently appraises how far language and culture have been able to solve the problem of identity in Nigeria as a nation.

Language, Culture and National Identity

Language is the only factors that can make Nigerians come closer to one another as a people. Language is the soul, the pivot and the nucleus of people's culture. It is the centre and unifying force of cohesion, though for a multi-ethnic country as ours, different languages serve as the disintegrating force. Language would have served as a national identity for Nigeria, if not for her multi-lingual nature. People who contemplate making the English language a lingua-franca for Nigeria should know that a foreign language cannot be a nation's identity. It can only work among the elites, but not with the illiterate masses. On the other hand, if one of the three major languages, Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba is adopted, what happens to the minor ethnic groups?

Over the years, this issue has faced serious oppositions. An example is this excerpt from Newswatch Editorial (1989, Vol. 9 No. 12 P. 14).

Once more tempers ran high, especially among opponents of the three major languages. Many of them (Constituent Assembly members) numbering between 80 and 100 staged a walk-out symbolically protesting Aniagolu's biased handling of the language question...

This attitude has continued to bedevil the national language question, thus making the adoption of any of these indigenous languages as national language remains elusive. If one of the three major languages – Igbo, Hausa, or Yoruba is adopted, the problem still remains how the language will be taught in schools.

In the case of WAZOBIA, (the amalgam of the language of the three major ethnic groups), it is a linguistic fact

that lexemes or graphology of a language must be peculiar to that language. Teachers have a lot of difficulties and challenges teaching languages that their graphology is formed from inter-language borrowing. The WAZOBIA language became the most cumbersome language in the whole world because it is a fusion of three language components. For one to use the language, one must have a mastery of Yoruba for WA, Hausa for ZO and Igbo for BIA. How many persons have that language competence in this country? Language and culture are veritable sources of National Identity for a nation that has one language and similar cultural attributes but such is difficult in Nigeria. A People's language is the people. Language is not just a system of symbols or codes for communication. It is an embodiment of people's culture, and a people's culture is their identity among the committee of nations. Therefore, language is the people's life-wire. Language does not only manifest in vocal sounds but also in Para-and meta-linguistic devices that derive from the culture of the people. Language is translated into a people's mode of dressing, the food they eat, their mode of greeting, even to how they laugh.

In the light of the foregoing, one cannot place a finger on what one has, as a people. Nigeria is an amorphous society, a boiling pot, an embodiment of all sorts of cultures, and it gives them no identity. The majority of Nigeria problems in here range from their multi-lingual status. In a situation where a society is monolingual, the problem of socio-linguistics is not much, as emphasis will be on conceptualizing the working of language in the nation. But in a multilingual society, the problem is multiple as the study goes beyond areas of conceptualization and focuses on how language can be used to resolve disparities that arise from the levels of behaviour and thought, and these are issues pertaining to culture.

Okere, (2006) states:

...it is an accident of history that the English language has become almost indispensable in

Nigeria's national survival. It was the accident of history that made the British to impose their language, English on us. It was an accident of history that occasioned a multi-lingual situation in Nigeria via the amalgamation of the various ethnic groups. This resulted in the need to have a common language as a medium of expression in areas of education, commerce and politics. That was the bane of a colonized underdeveloped nation. It was an accident of history that the concept of existentialism made us see ourselves as Nigerians infested by power potentials and tussles between the major and minor ethnic groups; their languages were among the issues at stake (pg. 123)

Of course the languages that usually survive struggles are those whose lexical and structural scope do survive linguistically and accommodate the language demand of a medium of expression.

Conclusion and Recommendations

“No matter how much a short man gets angry, he cannot grow over night”. Though Nigeria as a nation uses the language of her colonial masters, English, it cannot be said that English language has achieved the project of National Identity; rather it is used for national and international transactions, by the elites who are opportune to learn it. Such transactions can go with English language only in the interim. There is the need, therefore, to present something to the international community in order to be accepted. As our people say, “he, who does not take an article to the market, cannot determine the price of the product”. Nigerians need to do their home work very well and in one accord too. There is need to negotiate language and this can only be possible if the existing language is replaced with a new one. A national language will foster not only national identity, but also reconciliatory ventures and national consciousness. The teaching of indigenous languages should be

encouraged at all levels of education to give everyone the pride to belong to a common nation, Nigeria.

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