The Impact of Indigenous Languages in Sustainable National Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study explores the topical issue of how indigenous languages can contribute to Nigeria's development in the twenty-first century. Colonization offered Nigerians the opportunity to be bilingual and learn a foreign language (English) which they now use in official communication and everyday activities. In many respects, the acquisition of a foreign language gave many Nigerians the freedom to acquire new status and identities. The implication is the relegation of native or indigenous languages to the background. The focus of this paper is to explore the extent to which the indigenous languages can bring about revival and vigour in Nigeria's quest for development in the twenty-first century. The discourse on sustainable development has generally shown surprisingly little interest in the possible relevance of language to this field of inquiry. The major argument in this paper is that sustainable development is mediated through local knowledge, inculcated through the indigenous languages. This paper takes up the issue of the link between Nigerian languages and sustainable development. Its main purpose is not to lament the dangers resulting from Nigeria's linguistic fragmentation or the linguistic fascism of the English Language, but to highlight the positive role indigenous languages can play in the quest for sustainable national development.

Introduction

Language is central to human development and the development of language increases the pace of human development. A common indigenous language increases the prospects of cooperation and interaction more effectively. Banjo (2010: 5) has noted that language is

the "life blood of every community whether large or small, and whatever the stage of the community's development." The point to ponder at this stage is the contribution of language to the evolution of past civilizations down the ages. For example, the Greeks, the Arabs, the Romaus, the languages have each developed a rich civilization due to the highly developed state of their language, and have in the Chiness bequeathed their rich culture and civilization to the world. Today, the dominance of the USA in world affairs is largely aided by the English language.

The loss of indigenous West African languages in commercial and official communication started with the arrival of Arab traders who came with their religion and language (Omolewa 1981:1). Having arrived in the West African sub-region the Arab traders embarked on a process of conversion, an effort which involved adapting not only to religion (Islam), but also to Arabic as a foreign language. However, the few Muslim teachers did not radically alter much of the traditional system of education which was based on the mother tongue (Hausa/Fulani) in the northern part of Nigeria.

Official contact with the Europeans in Nigeria started in the fifteenth century with the Portuguese traders and the priest. The Portuguese contingent introduced the first European language in Nigerian soil (Portuguese), and English languages followed later. However, these foreign languages were restricted in scope. For instance, the Portuguese language was limited to the "counts of Warri and Benin" (Omolewa 1981:2). In turn, the English language was first restricted to the nobility, and one of its characteristics was its functionality. It was more or less the language of business. In the Efik kingdom, the Ohong of Calabar recognized the use of English in trading, and thereafter founded schools to train the children of the royal families in English. Thus, by the end of the 18th century in addition to the multitude of indigenous languages, foreign languages like Arabic, Portuguese and English were being taught and confined only to the aristocratic families. English Language was introduced into Nigeria by the missionaries who arrived at Badagry in 1842, though before this, time there had been some incursions by English slave traders, but this had little effect.

The Conquest of Indigenous Languages in Nigeria

There are approximately about 6,000 languages and dialects in the world and 50% of them are threatened. Nigeria *alone* has about 450 languages and none of these has up to 70 percent of the population as its speakers. Three major Nigerian languages are Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa. Other indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria include Echie, Efik, *Ibibio,* Kanuri, Ikwere, etc. These languages have since lost their position even as a Mother Tongue (MT)

to some Nigerians, especially to those born in the cities in the last 25 years and among children of inter-tribal marriages.

The teaching of English Language entered a new phase with the introduction of colonial rule in the 19th century. Thenceforth the English Language became the language of school programmes, administration and commerce. This marked the beginning of the decline of indigenous languages in Nigeria. Having lost social and economic privileges, indigenous languages in addition began to lose native speakers. According to Omolewa (1981:5) "any meaningful discussion of the status of any language must take account not just of the teaching method or classroom situation but of prevalent socio-political and economic situation."

One major constraint to the status of Nigerian languages is attitude. Attitudes are a set of beliefs, dispositions human behavior. The importance of attitude to the survival , decay or prominence of languages have been acknowledged by Lewis (1981). Lewis states that:
Any policy for language, especially in the system of education, has to take account of the attitudes of those like be affected. In the long run no policy will succeed which does not do one of three things: conform to express: negative attitudes of those involved; persuade those who express negative attitudes, about the rightness *of the* policy; or seek to remove the causes of the disagreement.... (cited in Adekunle 1995: 59).

Because of the role English has been playing in various Nigerian societies. Nigerians, especially the elite, developed various attitudes toward English and the various indigenous languages. Among the elite, there is rigid/patterned language behavior, and some have come to believe, rather erroneously that intelligence or knowledge is synonymous with competence iii English. Adekunle (1995:61) makes a strong case for indigenous languages when he remarked that "the indigenous systems embody the much needed wisdom and knowledge needed for scientific and technological resurgence of Africa".

Indigenous languages in National Development Plans

We have seen that English language has a dominant stains in Nigeria because of the functions. Nevertheless appreciation of the indigenous languages will foster improvement iii National security, technology aild even education. A focused plan on the development and codification of the indigenous languages will bring about (a) national unity and cultural awareness. Cultural awareness involves

> the cultivation on a national scale, of group identity and solidarity motivated by the need for national self —determination in all its

> ramifications These national ideas and values can only be propagated and inculcated through the indigenous languages. In fact, it will be a contradiction to try to inculcate these values through a foreign language.... (Adekunle 1995:83)

Language is a cultural heritage, not just cultural but also an intellectual heritage. Language conveys knowledge and local know-how, and is therefore irreplaceable tool for sustainability. Faflinwa in an article titled "Coping with the Advanced Technology" in the Daily Times of April 11, 1985 lamented the lack of indigenous languages in national development plans. The consequence is the repeated and abysmal failure of such programmes. As he said: "We teach agriculture in English and Nigerian farmers farm in Igbo, Hausa, Efik, Nupe, Kanuri ,etc" (cited in Adekunle 1995: 51

Traditionally, education for sustainable development places the promotion of mother tongues/indigenous languages as a priority in its objectives with the fight against illiteracy. Clearly the use of official languages tends to exclude people from participation in matters concerning their communities. Although many people in Nigeria are biliugual their knowledge of outside languages outside their ethnic domain is restricted. Inevitably, the use of official languages excludes many people from participating in national dialogue, with issues of security and politics.

Nigerian indigenous languages have an important part to play in fostering the emergent cultural nationalism. Studying indigenous languages will offer us an understanding of ourselves as Nigerian people. Knowing ourselves will enable us to strengthen our national values and interests. This is because having a sound knowledge of our culture is an - essential element for safe-guarding our national interest.

The point is that working knowledge of an indigenous language is an indispensable tool for national development and this will help Nigeria to better manage the numerous ethnic/religious crises facing the country. While there may be increasing interactions between Nigerians and people from other countries who speak the English language, there is few level of cultural exchange among Nigerians themselves, owing to the inability of most Nigerians to speak one or more of the indigenous languages. Even among the youth, it is difficult to find fluent speakers of indigenous languages among those between 15- 25 year- age- brackets. This has serious repercussions for sustainable national development. The Yoruba language, which appeared in print in 1819 (Awoniyi 1981: 71) and used in formal education could have played major roles in national development had the policy makers encouraged its social, cultural and economic space. Over the years, the attitude of

scholars and policy markers towards indigenous language has been lukewarm. This is surprising especially when Nigerian educational philosophy lays much emphasis on the integration of the individual into a sound and effective citizen... and geared towards self-realization, better human relationship individual and national efficiency, effective citizenship, national consciousness, national unity, economic, political, scientific and technological progress. National Policy on Education 1977: 4).

Another scholar, Adebowale (2011:7) calls for empowering the indigenous languages in the twenty- first century if Nigeria is to become relevant in the globalized world. In her inaugural lecture titled" Writing and Reacting: The Experience in Indigenous Yobfi Literary Art" Adebowale averred:

> For Nigeria to be relevant in the globalised world, its indigenous languages must not die.
> There is need for creative writers to write in the indigenous African languages. Since literature serves as cultural repository, it is worthless trying to use a totally strange and foreign language to preserve African culture.

Language is indeed a major repository of culture, a means of communicating ideas and thoughts. Indigenous languages have the prospect of being agents of technological advancement. This is because most of the technologically developed societies like China, South Korea, Japan and the West achieved technological feats using their native tongues.

Nigerian Languages in the Twenty-first Century

The challenge, then, is how far we can build the capacity of Nigerian languages so that they can be relevant in the ongoing dialogue for Nigeria's sustainable development agenda? Technology and sustainable development have always been implicitly central to an understanding of what language is or can be. It is difficult to achieve technology in an imported language. Unfortunately, during the twentieth century, however, as is widely known and recognized, English Language colonized indigenous languages, which in turn, became subject languages, just as the people who ***speak*** them became subject citizens. Indeed, by dint of historical accident, past and present empires, and lately, through a virtual monopoly of Microsoft, English Language has increasing expanded in the global communication network. The implication includes a more subordinated position of indigenous languages.

The ultimate challenge is to develop the indigenous languages to the extent that they become economically empowered. According to Rob Pope (2002:31) English Language is the major invisible exports of Britain, the USA and Australia. He further remarks that "In the UK alone, in the year 2000, ELT (English language Teaching) accounted for over 750 million pounds of revenue and over 1,000 million pounds in associated publishing." In contrast, there is no indigenous Nigerian language that is in any great demand. Nigeria's position as a major stake holder in the oil market and as the most populous black nation in the world should confer a major economic and political status on, at least, one of the major languages of Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. The Chinese Language has acquired more global status to because Europe and America want to tape from the achievement of the Chinese civilization, culture and technology. Every human civilization starts with language and language has the power of constructing possible models of human experience. Through language science learns more and more about the world; language evolves and improves both science and technology. Therefore the empowerment of indigenous languages in sustainable national development will lead to the following:

1. Achievement of literacy and an interactive positive attitude towards people from other ethnic groups
2. The rise of nationalism and cultural revival
3. The ultimate emergence of a tolerant consciousness and a broader understanding of our cultural heritage and identity
4. The emergence of Nigeria as a major power play in the comity of nations.

As Brumfit says (1995:105): "Although knowledge is not merely power, language use, and knowledge about language… have a specifiable relationship to power," hence the debate about the future of Nigerian languages, in part, about the potential for power of the use of the indigenous languages in official communication.

If Arabic, Japanese and Chinese are becoming immensely important international languages today, why can't Igbo, Yoruba or Hausa not become a West African lingua franca? if any of these languages acquires such considerable status in the next 20 years, how shall we respond to that? Will that change our attitudes to the use of indigenous languages in conferences such as this? Will that help us to develop the research and understanding we need? The interaction between sustainable development and the use of the indigenous languages is going to determine where Nigeria goes as a major player in the globalised world. But what we can expect is that the importance of indigenous languages in our search for national survival and technological advancement is going to be enormous.

Inclusion

This paper assumes that the dominant position of English in Nigeria has not brought about national development. At least, English has failed to serve as an instrument of national unity and security as has been hoped to be the case, in spite of its long official history. It has become clear that national objectives and ideologies are better communicated in the native languages. Nigerian MT can serve as integrative as well as induce positive attitudes and group identity.

Therefore attainment of efficient, writing and reading skills in the indigenous languages will promote multiculturalism and pave the way for sustainable national development.

As Afolayan (1995:128) has observed, "English was introduced into Nigeria in order to groom Nigerian citizens for service in the British colonial administration." The time has come to mould an indigenous language into an instrument capable of maximally developing the capacity of Nigerians to utilize the vast development opportunities in the twenty-first century. This means that while an indigenous language becomes a second language, English can serve as a foreign language.

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