National Development and the Functionality of Indigenous Language

By

Freedom Okwudiri Nwenwe, Ph.D
Department of English and Communication Arts,
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt
Freedomnwenwe184@gmail.com
08036708598, 08094730562

Abstract

Language as the chief means of communication and a unique gift of nature is important and key for human mentality and existence. Language strongly controls our lifestyles, world views, thoughts and reasoning. In man's community and experiences, it is inseparable as it is a vital element of culture which are some of the strongest models that guarantee human understanding and harmonious living with people and their environment. This paper examines how the indigenous language can contribute to the national development. It argues that language is the life wire of every nation and most importantly, the indigenous language, which adequately and positively penetrates peoples' minds for positive change. Nicholars Bear: 2010 claims that indigenous language enhances better understanding and academic performance. This implies that change will only take place when the people are empowered by their own language and culture. This paper also looked at some of the advantages of indigenous language and also the impediments threatening its existence. The paper also reveals that globalization and imperialism have significantly changed the people's attitude and perception towards indigenous language most especially the youths who are often shy of their history. The study further recommends that government should promote policies that will domesticate and implement laws that will incorporate indigenous languages into the school curricula, ranging from the Nursery to the University education levels. It also recommends that parents, teachers and the churches should bring indigenous language to the fore of communication with the view to bringing national development.

Keywords: National, Development, Functionality, Indigenous, Language

Introduction

It is within the nexus of the society that language functions optimally and just like language cannot also function optimally without the enabling environment provided by the society and the society cannot function without language. Based on this, it is seen that language is central to human development and the development of language no doubt is pivotal instrument of human and national development. Language is an essential moulding and sharpening ingredient of human perception and ideas, emotions, imagination and actions. Language is the enabling condition of human and national development. The choice of language and its use is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to the entire universal (Ngugi 1986:10).

Language as we know is important to the life and civilization of a people. It gives identify to people, expresses their culture and serves as a means of communication and self expression (Ikediashli 2010). Primarily, indigenous language is said to be a native language that is spoken by origins or indigenous people of a region but has been reduced to the status of a minority language. Embedded within our indigenous languages are cultural concepts that naturally impact a deeper and better understanding of our immediate environment in relation to the world around us. Unfortunately, these languages have systematically been devalued for ages due to a misplaced sense of inferiority. The paradox here is that most of the concepts embedded and displayed by medicine, humanities, social sciences, etc are foundational in the indigenous cultures and languages.

This ugly situation i.e. devaluation has constantly affected the number of speakers of indigenous language, especially among the youths. UNESCO outlined nine indices employed in measuring the health of a language and one of them is the ratio of first language speaker to second language speaker. Of course, there is a significant drop in the number of mother tongue speakers which automatically is a major indicator for accessing the health of language. Imagine the unfortunate situation of these languages, notwithstanding their immense potentials and capabilities to deeply control, transform and develop man's innate being and his environment.

Clarifications of Concepts

Overview of Language

Language as a concept has variously been defined by several authors based on different perspectives. It is an established fact that language is vital to the life and civilization of a people, as it gives identity to people, express their culture and serves as a means of communication and self-expression.

Melvor (2005:7) sees language as the main source of cultural transference and a key link to identifying, connecting minds, body and spirit but also showing group cohesion. John (1999:95), language performs a lot of functions like prevention of wars, creation of ideas, understanding, peace (conflict resolution), love, stability and sanity and so on to curb social unrest, especially among the youths of a society. These therefore reveals that language controls human existence and mutual interaction and conflict resolution that are geared towards national development.

The Nigerian Language

The country is home to over 250 ethnic communities with diverse languages and rituals. The biggest ethnic communities are the Yoruba, Fulani/Hausa and Igbo representing 68% of the population of the country. These three major ethnics have the three major languages in Nigeria. The Ijaws, Edos, Ibibios, Kauris, Tivs, Eberas and Nupes and account for 27% while the other minorities make up the remaining 5% (Osuagwu, T. R. 2003).

Indigenous Language and National Development

An indigenous language is a language that originated from a particular place or region and also spoken by the origins of that land. An indigenous language contributes its specifics to the language of a wider communication that is usually imposed on their indigenous community, which is why it is called "substrate". For instance, the celtic languages are a substrate of English.

An indigenous language is the language of a people which are regarded as the original inhabitant of an area. It is the native language of the tribe that owns the indigenous language and it is commonly referred to as the mother tongue (L1).

Considering the functions of English language and its status in Nigeria, there is no doubt that it has a dominating power. However, an embrace of the indigenous language will foster improvement in National Security, technology and even education. A well-articulated plan on the development and codification of the indigenous language will enhance national unity and cultural awareness. A cultural awareness includes the cultivation on a national scale of group identify and solidarity motivated by the need for national self-determination in all its ramifications. These national values and ideas can only be propagated and inculcated through the indigenous languages. Infacts, it will be a contradiction to try to inculcate these values through a foreign languages (Adekunle 1995:83).

The indigenous language has an important part to play in fostering the emergent cultural nationalism. Studying indigenous language will pave way for a better understanding of each other as Nigerians. This knowledge will strengthen our national values and interests because a sound knowledge of our cultural is an essential element for safe guarding our national interests.

The indigenous language is an indispensable tool for national development as it will help Nigerians to better manage the numerous ethnic/religious crisis facing the country. While there may be high level of interactions between Nigerians and non-Nigerians in English language, there is low level cultural exchange among Nigerians themselves owing to the inability of most Nigerians to speak one or more of the indigenous languages. Even among the youths, it is difficult to find fluent speakers of indigenous languages among those between the ages of 15-25 years age brackets. Of course, this has serious repercussions for sustainable national development.

Though, many Nigerians are bilinguals and thereby, their knowledge of English language is limited. Therefore, the use of official language excludes many Nigerians from participating in matters concerning their communities. To a large extent, the use of official language tends to exclude people from participation in national dialogue. Adebowalle (2011:7) calls for empowering the indigenous language in the twenty first century if Nigeria is to become relevant in globalised world. In her inaugural lecture title "writing and reading: The experience in indigenous Yoruba Literacy Art." Adebowale (2011:7), affirms: 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.

The foregoing succinctly reveals that language is indeed a major repository of culture, a means of communicating ideas and thoughts. Indigenous languagehave the prospects of being agents of technological advancement, because most of the technological developed societies like China, South Korea, Japan and the rest achieved technological feats using their native tongues.

Indigenous language is an indicators of man's entire existence and the human mind is the main essence of man and his existence. If language all and these potentials as enumerated in this work, then there is need to use a people's language, the primary domain's language to control man and address issues confronting humanity. This is because, speeches couched in English language frequently invite the same type of resistance and did the authoritarian directives of the colonial masters (Mansour, 1993:86). Indigenous language functions as a symbol identity, pride and unity to an individual. Therefore, it calls for consideration as a language used in family interactions, friendship, market, street, community or village groups as opposed to English language that can create distortion, resistance, confusion and bias in the psyche of the people.

The indigenous language is an in-group language in which an individual has emotional attachment, especially in Africa, the indigenous languages are rich in proverbs and wise sayings that edifies the individual minds and conditions them towards a positive course of action in a cultural environment.

Ngugi (1986:28), refers to indigenous language as language of conceptualization, of thinking of formal education of mental development. Indigenous language enforces change because it penetrates deep into the inner most being of conceptualization of thinking and mental development because it is a language inherent of oneself Ngugi (1986:13) reaffirms "… that change will only happen when the proletariat is empowered by their own language and cultures."

It offers effective trainings which provide norms and teachings that align with indigenous person's own inherent perspective, experiences, open-mindedness, sense of identity and the love, appreciation and the preservation of the works and history of the ancestors, customs, respect and value for our various cultural realities that will transform and build people into committed and meaningful adulthood devoid of crisis. The main aim of an indigenous language is to achieve behavioural change, maintain social cohesive, improve standards and instill values through the adoption of traditional and cultural practices owing to the fact that the indigenous language instructor also transmits his personal influences in a language that is in sync with one's inherent experiences. This automatically indigenous language instills a kind value system, especially among the youths that deters them from strife, cultism, gunnery, kidnapping, human trafficking among others. Indigenous language and its peculiarities as it were, provide children with more opportunity and context to use. Reyher, (2010:145) saw the decline in the use of indigenous language as correlating with a loss of a people's tradition, the unraveling of the extended family, depression among group members, high dropout rates among students and an increasing amount of gang activity.

Indigenous language enhances cultural knowledge beginning at a young age. It builds and deposits in them a sense of integrity that will enable them stand that test of time in times of adversity. Indigenous language infuses boldness and stability in an individuals and these are integral aspects of mankind and development. The indigenous language builds and prepares the mind for adequate participation without fear in an environment. Stability offers a strong foundation for coping later on with adulthood and responsibility. This variable will of course strength the youths with the enabling abilities to stand for their right and not to be used as thugs by the untrusting politicians whose children study aboard.

The use of indigenous language has also been shown to improve academic success. Accordingly, students who participate in immersion programming are likely to academically and behaviourally succeed (Reyher 2010: 143), (Guevreniont & Kohen, 2012:1).

Bilingualism – Integration of indigenous language in school promotes bilingualism. Overtime, it has been claimed that teaching in indigenous language enhance academic performance, Nicholas Bear (2010). No doubt, comparative studies of monolingual and bilingual children revealed a significant advantage in working memory of bilinguals as they intend to have more flexible minds, tolerance and balance in their thinking (Bialy Stok et al 2012: 200; Melvor 2005:9).

Indigenous language influence on identity is also reinforced by resilience and control of destiny; these factors impact coping strategies that relate to partaking in risk behaviours (such as suicide, violence, cultism, crime, alcohol, drug and sexual abuse etc). Boughton (2000:4); cadet – James et al (2014:4), also emphasize that it should be noted that youths who have cultural schooling are less likely to consider suicide as an option Arim et al (2016:66).
Several scholars in the field assert that indigenous language and knowledge have a transformative power for indigenous communities that can be used to foster empowerment and justice.

Advantages of Indigenous Language
Learners learn better and faster and eagerly in their mother tongue (UNESCO). It encourages confidence and affirms people's cultural identity which sensitizes and creates positive awareness about the importance of education to their lives.
Nurturing indigenous language enhances more egalitarian projects of globalization. It avails the learners with an environment where he is sufficiently proficient in the language of instruction. Therefore, it encourages the interactive learner centered approach which will enable learners to interact, collaborate and transfer new ideas with enthusiasm while the introduction of foreign language as a medium of instruction will automatically result to a teacher – centred approach which is equally to an exclusive active involvement of the teacher while the learner are in a passive and receptive mode.

Statistics has it that, centres which rant highest in the world mathematics and science competitive are more often those that pay more attention to the use of indigenous language as a medium of instruction in schools.

The impediments of indigenous language

One of the challenges of indigenous language is the global shift from recognizing and understanding indigenous language models as a viable and legitimate language due to the rapid spread of Western/Foreign language all over the world. Also, increasing modernity is another impediment to the indigenous language. Indigenous language is gradually going into extinction because of the decrease need for them and a significant lack of interest among the youths. Another major challenge of indigenous language is cultural imperialism. Imperialism is the policy of forcefully extending a nation's authority by territorial gain or by the establishment economic and political dominance over other nations. Imperialism is a major drawback in the status of our indigenous language. It destroys a people, their beliefs, dreams, language, environment heritage and their entire purpose of human. Ngugi (1986:28), imperialism is like separating the mind from the bodyor a larger scale, it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies. Accordingly (Cook 1997:1), paraphrases Ngugi's conception of imperialism. Imperialism disrupts the entire fabric of the live of its victims, making them ashamed of their names, history, language, love, art, dance and even the colour of their skin.

Advert of private primary, secondary and universities spring up on daily basis in the cities and urban regions. Yet some of such schools do not effect the school's curriculum, so it implies lack of improvement in the sustainability of the native cultures. Consequently upon this, is the loss of the very culture they are fighting to preserve. Other challenges facing indigenous language are multiplicity of indigenous language, non-proficiency in indigenous language, non-documentation of indigenous language and the preference for English language.

Conclusion

The absence of indigenous language as a major means of human communication brings about moral decadence and hinders growth and national development. In order to achieve national unity, peace, economic progress and development, the government, stakeholders, citizens especially the youths must change that attitude and conception about indigenous language. Considering the enormous benefitsof indigenous language, like educational effectiveness which imparts training that align with the indigenous person's own inherent perspectives, experiences, sense

of identity and the love, appreciation and preservation of the works and history of the ancestors, customs respect and values for our various cultural realities, there is no doubt that it will better influence and condition the human mind that will in turn signal and evoke transformation and national development that will build people into committed and meaningful adulthood devoid of crisis. Non-governmental organizations and stakeholders must be seriously committed to upgrading the indigenous language to the fore of human communication.

Recommendations

The indigenous language should be encouraged and supported to exist where they originate. Official language act recognizing the indigenous languages of those areas should be passed by every region. Adequate funding should be made available by NGO's, stakeholders of areas or the government should hire and ensure indigenous language learning and transmission in schools, offices and government. Indigenous language are an aboriginal right enriched in section 35 of the constitution as well as an inherent right to speak and pass on their languages that are recognized internationally by the United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Peoples (UNDRP).

There should be laid down plans to offer these languages alongside English and French in our day care centres, nursery and primary, secondary and university education. Government should also ensure sustainability of such innovation that it will not be subjected to the political caprices of successive governments. There should be a legal and fund for proprietors and proprietresses of indigenous language pre-school, printing, writing and publishing folktales and folklores in the indigenous language and distributing them for free to enhance the learning and promotion of indigenous languages. Students at all levels should be mandated to write one African indigenous book during and after school graduation.

Finally, government should adopt and implements a policy of using indigenous language in our educational system. This has to be monitored because adoption of a policy in the Nigerian context is one thing and its application is another.

References

Arim, R., Government, A. & Kohen, D. (2016). The relationship between experiences and mental health outcomes among of reserve first Nations youths. Abouriginal Policy Studies S. (2).

Block, N. (1995). On a confusion about a function of consciousness. Behavioural and brain sciences, *18*(2), 227-247.

Boughton, B. (2000). What is the connection between bouginal education and abourginal health occasional paper series, issues No 2, Menzias school of health research, Alice Springs 1-39.

Bear, Nicholas A. (2010). Wanted: Aboriginal immersion. *Telegraph Journal P. All*.

Chandler, M. I., & Lalonds, C. E. (1998). Cultural continuity as hedge against suicide in Canada's first Nations.

Cook David (1997). Ngugi Wa Thiongo: An exploration of his writings. Oxford: James currency Ltd.

Fodor, J. A. (1975). The language of thought, Cambridge, MIT, Havard University Press.

Littlejohn, S. W. (1999). Theories of human communication. New Mexico. Warsworth publishing company.

Manseur, Greda (1993). Multilingualism and nation building Bristol: multilingual matters limited.

Ngugi Wa Thiongo: A profile of a literary and social activists: Retrieved 10th October, 2017.

Nwala, M. A. (2015). Introduction to linguistics: A first course. Port Harcourt: Obisco Nig. Enterprises.

Raynner, J. (2010). Indigenous language immersion schools for strong indigenous identities. *Heritage language Journal.*

Melvor, O. (2005). The contribution of indigenous heritage language immersion progamme to health childhood development research connections. Canada: Supporting children and families.

Spirkin, A. Dialectical materialism consciousness of the world and the world of consciousness Marxist.org. Retrieved 10th October, 2017.