

NATIONAL INTEGRATION AND SOCIAL STABILITY – THE IMPERATIVE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract

In a multi-lingual and multi-ethnicity society, integration and social stability are pivotal issues. Given the socio-linguistic, cultural, religious, political and economic nature of the Nigerian nation-state, sociological issues bordering on national integration and social stability cannot but arise. However, the question emanating from these social factors is: what is the imperative for experiencing sustainable integration, development and fulfillment in a nation-state like Nigeria where such social factors abound? This paper therefore examines the imperative of English Language in achieving social stability, while acting as agent of socio-linguistic justice and an integrative force on the various ethnic nationalities and a veritable utility tool for sustaining the same national integration and social stability.

Key Words: National Integration, Social Stability, English Language, Multi-Lingual Society, Multi-Ethnic Society, Nigerian Nation-State.

Introduction

In the Nigerian sociological environment, language use has been pivotal in integrating the various socio-linguistic and socio-cultural or ethnic groups that make up the nation. The same use of language has proved to be a key factor in ensuring social harmony amongst members of the same ethnic group and by extension enhancing social stability and development.

An individual or a nation cannot be identified without his/her language. No wonder Kunene asserts that “we can only begin to comprehend, in a small way, the identity of the writer --- the totality of his/her world view – if we know his/her language” (145-151). So, whereas the issue of ethnic identification strongly lies with the indigenous language(s), that of nationally integrating the various ethnic groups and languages lies with a national or common language.

Thus in a heterogeneous society like Nigeria, the various ethnic groups have their languages, moral values, cultures, religious beliefs, attitude towards life and death (Kunene, 145-151; Njimezi and Egonu, 393-398). Prior to the colonial advent, each ethnic group proudly upheld her identity, ethnic values security and social relevance. Even after being amalgamated in 1914 by Lord Lugard, the various ethnic groups in Nigeria still strive to uphold their values and “this is where the problems of Nigeria stated” (Ojukwu and Ojukwu, 526). So, the implementation and utilization of the English Language in Nigeria becomes the unavoidable linguistic imperative for effective communication, interaction, association, exchange of ideas, share of views and values, pursuit of collective dreams, enhancing of national integration and social stability. The thrust of this paper is further discussed in tripartite course: firstly, the language situation in Nigeria; secondly, the advent of the English Language use in Nigeria and thirdly, the imperatives of the English Language for national integration and social stability.

The Language Situation in Nigeria

Nigeria is a large country, situated in the western part of Africa. Nigeria covers 356, 668 square miles, stretches roughly 700 miles from west to east and 650 miles from south to north and

covers an area between 3° and 15° E Longitude and between 4° and 14° N Latitude (Toyin and Mathew, 2). The history of Nigeria is an extensive one. Archeological evidence shows that human habitation of the area dates back to at least 9000 BCE (Odinye and Odinye, 632).

There are more than 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria with no fewer than 516 languages (Bamgbose in Upah, 42; Anyachonkeya, 109). Nigeria, through a natural phenomenon, the Niger Benue "Y" shaped rivers, is divided into three major areas. These are the North, the West and the East. This natural division coincides with the three major languages cum ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Hausa in the North, the Yoruba in the West and the Igbo in the East. Beyond these major ethnic and language groups, there are also the minority ethnic groups with their languages (Olanrewaju, 172). A scenario such as this makes Nigeria a multilingual nation.

Given this complex language situation, Nigeria then faces a complex ethnic grouping scenario with very perplexing linguistic problems. Olanrewaju observes that the implication of such perplexing linguistic situation is the lack of "a common, easy and effective communication among the various linguistic groups" (173). Obviously, a situation like this leads to a cultural, social, political, religious conflicts, insecurity and insensitivity. A situation such as this can still be overcome if one of the three or all the three major Nigerian languages – Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba, is/are adopted as national language(s). Doing this will to a large extent, solve the problems of national identity, ethnic cohesion, security and social stability.

But the linguistic situation where none of the indigenous languages is dominant within the sociological entity called Nigeria, makes it imperative for an individual to still learn and use the linguistic knowledge of another language to be able to

communicate and relate harmoniously with other people from different ethnic groups. The English Language naturally therefore assumes this position within the Nigeria nation-state. The advent of English Language into the Nigerian sociological milieu thus, demands further examination.

The Advent of English Language Use in Nigeria

The 18th Century and 19th Century economic, religious and political activities of some European nations but particularly, Britain opened a wider door for the entrance of English Language into the shores of West Africa and Nigeria precisely (Omeluwa in Otagburuagu, 84).

Before the British colonial administration gained hold of what is now called Nigeria, English Language was introduced and used in Nigeria for economic transaction between the European navigators/traders and Nigerians who came in contact with them (Otagburuagu, 83-88).

In addition, the early missionary activities of European Christian missionaries who come to Nigeria, historically and linguistically heightened the implantation, spread and use of English Language in Nigeria. These Christian missionaries brought the two-fold programmes of evangelization and western education. The churches and mission-schools they established used the medium of English Language in preaching the gospel and in teaching educational subjects (Otagburuagu, 83-88).

As the British colonization quest secured the territory of Nigeria, the English Language was the veritable instrument of communication between the colonial officers and the natives. In fact, the British colonization of Nigeria meant the formal implantation and adoption of the English Language in the nation's

national, social and political life (Otagburuagu, 85). According to Omeluwa in Otagburuagu

... English Language was the official language in the places where British missionaries settled. Even the non – English missionaries resident in Nigeria conformed ... (84).

Linguistically, the introduction of English Language into the multilingual Nigerian society afforded the various ethnicity groups ease of communication and interaction. The use of English Language enabled them to understand themselves.

The training of natives as interpreters, clerks etcetera in the colonial administration was enhanced through the teaching, learning and use of English Language. Also there was the desire by natives to acquire western education which is central to national development. Through the learning and use of English Language which was the major language of instruction in the mission and government and schools, this desire was realized (Njemanze, 656).

At every developmental level in Nigerian socio-political, economic, religious, literary, scientific, technological life and pursuit of national identity, ethnicity cohesion, security and social stability, English is chiefly utilized.

The Imperatives of English Language for National Integration and Social Stability

One pertinent question begging for consideration is: can Nigeria achieve “national integration”, and “social stability” without the use of language? The two key words stated above are all social factors. These social factors do not exist in vacuum. They are found among people. Like the two key words above, language (whether indigenous or foreign; first or second) is a form of social

behaviour or phenomenon. It is as well as a human phenomenon (Syal and Jindal, 11).

Human beings articulate their thoughts or ideas and express their feelings, emotions, fears, desire, and dreams etcetera using language. Okafor in Ugoji defines language as “a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which people within a social group interact” (95-96). Nigerians from different ethnicities and using different languages, by the reason of amalgamation of 1914, found themselves within a new social group, hence the need for interaction and integration. This interaction and integration can only be achieved most positively using language. Unfortunately, given the socio-linguistic nature of Nigeria as a multilingual nation, none of her indigenous languages could advance to assume the imperative role of a national or official language or the nation’s lingua franca. This prompts further question: why could none of the indigenous Nigerian languages meet the nation’s need of national integration and social stability?

Until the arrival of the colonial British government, the history of the pre-colonial Nigeria shows that the various independent ethnic groups lived in harmony. There was socio-cultural identity, socio-political, religious and economic stability in these independent ethnic-linguistic groups. The various ethnic groups were “organized in such a way that each person was his brother’s keeper” (Madubuko in Ojukwu and Ojukwu, 524).

Things fell apart when in 1914, the British colonial officer, Lord Lugard, amalgamated the different ethnic and linguistic groups. This new socio-political situation brought different ethnic groups that have no common history, language, belief system or culture into one nation (Madubuko in Ojukwu and Ojukwu, 524).

So, it became obvious to the British colonial administration that for the amalgamation to succeed, the English Language

programme in Nigeria must be pursued with extra force besides the force earlier generated from the other factors such as navigation, trading and missionary activities (Njemanze, 656). Thus, introduction of English Language generally afforded Nigerians irrespective of their ethno-linguistic groups, ease of communication, socialization, mutual understanding and co-operation necessary for national integration, social stability and development of any nation-state and vital for self realization and fulfillment of her citizens.

With such a fundamental demand that falls squarely on the shoulder of language, the English Language becomes the veritable and imperative language capable of doing justice, socio-linguistically, to the national needs of the Nigerian nation-state, albeit ensuring national integration and social stability.

In Nigeria, one major problem warring against it from inception as a nation-state is the lack of national identity. What exists is ethnic identity. Members of each ethnic group would rather be loyal and committed to the development of their ethnic group than to the nation called "Nigeria". This strong tie to the ethnic group or nationality is not unconnected with the ethnic language. Therefore, the use of English Language in Nigeria by a Nigerian in such a way that is "able to carry his peculiar experience" (Achebe 1964) is about the best way of providing national integration for the citizen. No other single indigenous language can give this type of national integration, feeling, pride and sense of belonging to the multi-ethnic people of diverse languages in Nigeria (Olanrewaju, 172). Olanrewaju equally observes that:

It is the Nigerian texture in the English Language in Nigeria that provides the "in-group" variety for

internal communication and gives the individuals the sense of oneness, unity and loyalty. The in-group element reflects a common national background, a common national culture and a common attitude to life (174).

Given its neutral status, the English Language, unlike any of the Nigerian indigenous linguistic system, does not engender any ethnic hostility. It rather promotes harmonious co-existence amidst Nigeria's ethnic and linguistic diversity.

The English Language serves as the veritable tool through which information-social, political, religious and economic are being transmitted to the people in Nigeria. Ugoji rightly notes that considering the heterogeneous nature of Nigeria, especially in the area of language, the only way through which the various multi-ethnic and linguistic groups could be reached is through the use of the English Language (101).

For Social Stability to be achieved in Nigeria human resource development is indispensable and the English Language is imperative in ensuring such development. Tudaro in Ugoji states thus:

... of all the contributory factors to economic development, human resources stand out as a major force because people are the real wealth of any nation and because the basic objective of economic development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long health and creative lives (101-102).

One major negative factor responsible for the "Boko-Haram" incidence in the northern part of Nigeria is the failure over

the years, by the religious and political leaders in the North, to develop and empower the majority of the northern youths. Today, the entire nation is reaping the sore fruit of such avoidable neglect.

Equally, inability of the past political leaders in the nation to create economic development and employment led to the sordid insecurity in the southern Nigeria where arm robbery and kidnapping abound most. What shall one say concerning the high rate of prostitution among the Nigeria young girls and young women? What of the “brain-drain syndrome” whereby many educated Nigerians are leaving their fatherland for other nations in search of green pasture? These and other negative social forces fighting against the nation’s development and social stability can be checked and controlled if all the stake-holders in Nigerian nation-state carefully articulate and implement the various national developmental plans using the English Language as a veritable tool of mass mobilization and social reengineering (Ugoji, 102).

Not only is the English Language regarded as the linguistic tool which can give access to the means of realizing the aspect of the Nigerian developmental aspiration, also in the areas of science and technology; information and communication technology (ICT), “English Language has very high frequency of use” (Ugoji, 98). According to Ekah, “English is the universal medium for communicating technological information” (82). It is used in the documentation of scientific research and technological production (NTI, 12 ; Adetugbo, 5). Thus, for Nigeria to achieve sustainable development that leads to social stability and positive nationality the language for such development must be employed. After all, “language in integration, means sustainable development means involving the people in shaping their lives” (Rassool in Ugoji, 95). Given the Nigerian socio-linguistic situation, the English Language is better suited for this role.

The common nature of English Language in Nigeria makes it a pre-requisite for civic and political practice, a linguistic tool of democracy and the instrument of the sphere where collective will and political affiliations “are forged” (Anyadiiegwu and Umera-Okeke, 697). Thus, English Language is the instrument by which Nigerian democratic processes develop and are maintained. Obviously, a national task like this cannot be realized using any of the ethno-linguistic markers in Nigeria except such that an indigenous language assumes a national status. Through the use of English Language, the different ethnic groups in Nigeria are carried along thereby fostering within the people a sense of belonging, which will inevitably lead to the attainment of not only national development and growth but also national integration and social stability.

In respect to Nigeria’s quest for “functional literacy” (Upah, 43), the English Language obviously becomes the imperative choice amidst the multitudes of languages of different ethnic groups in Nigeria. Its neutrality makes it a veritable instrument of communication across geo-ethnic boundaries, cultures, values, beliefs, mores, ethos and world-view. The fact remains that functional literacy comes through education and the content and subject matter of modern or western education is best represented in English Language which is the medium of instruction in Nigeria post-primary and post-secondary education system. Functional literacy when achieved in the nation, will inevitably lead to socio-economic, political and religious stability and stronger integration. It will indeed bring about “transformation including development of new skills and change in attitude and life style” (Bamgbose in Upah, 42).

Coupled with all that have been discussed above, it is language proficiency that can enable a nation or an individual to

participate in a world politics, trade, sports, arts, literature, tourism, etcetera. Unfortunately, none of Nigeria's indigenous languages have been advanced to an international status with international proficiency level. In spite of this linguistic reality, both leaders of the nation and the citizens have come to realize the imperative of participating in international activities. To achieve this therefore, knowledge of a language with high level of international proficiency becomes necessary. The English Language is one such elevated language. English is the language of international politics, sports, trade, arts, cultural transmission, tourism, literature, aviation, military-armament, science and technology, media, information and communication technology, etcetera (Adetugbo, 5; NTI, 12).

Conclusion

From the discussion above, this paper has been able to discern the limitation of English Language in respect to achieving the much needed national identity. The question of national identity should be the sole role of the language of the people, by the people, and for the people – the indigenous language(s). From the discussion also, the paper has been able to discern that in the absence of a national indigenous language, the English Language is the imperative for achieving national integration and social stability in Nigeria nation-state. Although English Language is the language of the colonial nation, Britain, it later assumed an elevated position in the socio-linguistic and geo-political society, called Nigeria. This prestigious status becomes inevitable give the multi-lingual and multi-ethnic situation in the Nigerian nation-state. The elevated position of English Language becomes necessary given the inability of the various ethnic-languages to assume a national language status or the nation's lingua franca. So,

given its neutrality, it therefore behooves the English Language in Nigeria to act as a veritable instrument of integrating the nation and her people, unifying the ethnic groups thereby creating a sense of belonging, oneness and brotherhood which are quite vital for achieving social stability that will inevitably lead to socio-economic and political development, collective and individual fulfillment and creativity.

The paper has equally observed that the onus of linking the Nigerian nation-state to the rest of the international community lies with the English Language with a high level of proficiency use. Therefore, it is the call of this paper to the various stakeholders in the Nigerian nation-state project to appreciate and employ the English Language as a veritable instrument of achieving international integration as well as sustaining national integration, and social stability.

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