

LANGUAGE PLANNING AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION: THE NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE.

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ABSTRACT

In multilingual settings, language which can be used as an effective instrument for national development and the promotion of national consciousness and unity can also be used as a weapon for marginalization, separation and exclusion. The latter trend can destabilize the nation as it is bound to set the different linguistic groups one against the other in their attempt to fashion out an identity for themselves and express their existence and relevance in the society. Examples of this can be found within and around Nigeria, where language has been a decisive factor in group integration or disintegration. This paper will provide some recommendations that will contribute towards solving the problems associated with the settings described above from the perspective of language as a socio-cultural tool expected to favour integration.

KEYWORDS: multilingual settings language national integration.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Language is a very relevant tool in the process of achieving national identification, prestige, unity and development. Herbert Kelman quoted by David Gordon is of the opinion that language is "both the major focus and goal of ethno-cultural integration" and, ultimately, of modernization (18). Joshua Fishman, Ayo Bamgbose and other language scholars have identified language as the live wire of society and the means for ensuring continuity, stability, and growth in the society. In this light, therefore, Okon Essien sees language as "... the tool with which we can best think, imagine, create, aspire, desire, feel and express our soul, enlarge out mental horizon and fulfil all that man is capable of..." (43). Peter Trudgill has equally asserted that:

Language is not simply a means of communicating information... It is also a very important means of establishing and maintaining relationships with other people (13).

Nigeria, the focus of this paper is a multilingual and therefore, a multi-cultural society with diverse socio-political, educational and economic problems which, we believe, are deeply rooted in the linguistic problems of the society. The subject of language research is indeed very

fundamental in Nigeria. This is especially so when we consider the role of language in nation building.

Research has shown that language is an indispensable variable in nation building. Nation building has been dichotomised into three categories viz: national integration, education, and national development. Language, as Ayo Bamgbose has pointed out, plays a decisive role in each of these categories.

2.0 THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN NATIONAL INTEGRATION

National integration has to do with fostering a sense of belonging together, a feeling of oneness or a sense of unity (Joshua Fishman, David Gordon, Patrick Stevenson and Ayo Bamgbose). Ayo Bamgbose sees national integration as the:

preoccupation of ensuring the continued oneness of a state as well as the forging of a bond of belonging together as nationals of the state amongst its citizenry (10).

Alexandre quoted in Ayo Bamgbose defines national integration as consisting of:

creating or strengthening within the borders of a country a collective

sentiment of belonging together irrespective of individual or subgroup differences (10).

Ideally, national integration should be a natural consequence of people coming together to form a nation state, where the nation is seen as representing "the site whereby life is led and endows existence with meaning both in the present and future" (Alter quoted in Patrick Stevenson (29)). Alter further opines that a nation is a social group with a consciousness of "coherence, unity and particular interest" (10). The criterion of consciousness or awareness is important in the concept of nationhood. The people have to be conscious of their desire to stay together as one and of "their demand for self determination".

It is indeed true that language is only one of the various means of interaction and hence integration amongst individuals and subgroups in a state or nation, but we would want to believe, like other scholars, that language is actually the key to national integration. Ayo Bamgbose has opined that:

"national integration is often fostered through a series of overt measures designed to reinforce the sentiment of oneness" (10).

He goes further to assert that these measures include:

... power sharing through [the] zoning of political and bureaucratic posts, a legal requirement for a multi-ethnic base for political parties, special programmes designed to bring young people together such as ... Nigeria's National Youth Service Corps ... and ideologies designed to raise national consciousness such as ... Nigeria's Military Government War Against Indiscipline/Mass Mobilization for social and Economic Reconstruction (10).

The success of these measures will still, in our opinion, depend on the ability of the participants to communicate effectively with one another. Some language scholars have rightly observed that communication must set up common modes of response in order to be communication as a breakdown in communication, we believe, will certainly impede the success of the measures referred to by Ayo Bamgbose above. This has been the case in Nigeria, where such measures which were designed to "provide a focus of national identity" are first and foremost subjected

to ethnolinguistic analysis and interpretations before that of national interpretations. This is because in Nigeria, language loyalties are sometimes tremendously more powerful than any other kind of loyalties like socio-political or religious loyalties. For this reason therefore, Gavin Williams and Terisa Turner have noted that in Nigeria, competition for access to resources has taken place predominantly between ethnically defined constituencies, and David Jowitt on the other hand, has noted that Nigerians generally perceive language as a mark of ethnicity. This, coupled with the excessive politicization of space as exemplified in the creation of states and local government areas and the continuous demands for these have led to the politicization of:

the differences and similarities in language, custom, religion and historical experience. These differences are used selectively to define and legitimize particular claims to solidarity and exclusion Gavin Williams and Terisa Turner (134).

The encouragement and subsequent ideologization of the similarities and differences in ethnicity and language amongst Nigerians as seen in the promotion of the quota system has far reaching implications on national integration and unity. The animosity and distrust which have arisen amongst the various ethnolinguistic groups are very glaring, thought provoking and frightening and they permeate every terrain of interaction. The observable tradition of highly localized loyalties has impeded the development of a widespread political consciousness of a Nigerian nation. Nigerians first see themselves in terms of their individual ethnic affiliations before seeing themselves as a people of one nation.

The concepts of 'staatsnation' and 'kulturation' which have been developed by some scholars in Germany can be made relevant here. Patrick Stevenson asserts that staatsnation refers to "the common bonds of a common political history" and kulturation, on the other hand, is based on a shared cultural heritage and typically incorporates things like language and literature (31). He is equally of the opinion that these concepts "can account for the role of language as an ideological vehicle in generating a national consciousness..." (31). In the Nigerian context, these concepts we believe can be cultivated and used to promote national integration. The history of colonialism and prolonged military rule provided Nigerians with 'the common bonds of a common political history

(31) as the experience was similar for them in spite of their differences in tribe, creed and tongue and this we believe, should bind all the ethnolinguistic groups together. In the area of language and literature which is what kulturenation is all about, Nigeria, as has been observed, is a nation of nations, each with its own kulturenation. In spite of noticeable differences in language, literature and socio-cultural norms amongst Nigerians, the concept of kulturenation could still be harnessed successfully for the purpose of integration. Given that staatsnation can contain and be derived from kulturenation and vice versa, Nigeria, which is a country with different cultural heritages but with a common colonial and post-colonial political history can encourage the growth of a national consciousness amongst its citizens by deriving and politicising shared cultural heritage(s).

A deliberate policy which will seek to highlight the things that can be made common amongst Nigerians of various ages, educational levels, socio-economic levels, religious affiliations and ethnic backgrounds can be formulated by the government. One of the things which could be made common amongst Nigerians, we believe is language. We therefore posit that language can be used to integrate Nigerians. This is because language does not only mirror society but can also be used as the medium to influence, condition or manipulate the people in the society.

It has been observed by language scholars that the issue of a national language can be very challenging indeed. This is particularly so in multilingual nations like Nigeria, where there are competing languages and conflicting interest. Ben Elugbe sees national language as a symbol of national oneness. Coulman quoted by Patrick Stevenson is of the opinion that "founding national languages is as much a consolidation of power as the founding of nations". In a country with a multiplicity of languages, the issue of a national language or languages is indeed very problematic. In Nigeria, every language is associated with an ethnic, political or social group. None, not even the English language as noted by Okon Essien is politically or socio-economically neutral. The choice of a national language or languages in the Nigerian context, has proven to be a very problematic, one capable of tearing the nation apart. David Jowitt has noted that in Nigeria, advocating for the promotion of any indigenous language to the status of a national language is regarded with suspicion by all Nigerians and a government policy that would favour such advocacy would

face "serious and potentially most damaging opposition" (42).

Many ideological arguments have, therefore, been put forward; these arguments range from the political through the socio-cultural to the economic ideas in support of, or against the formulation of a national language policy. Many of these arguments which lay claims to pragmatism have equally been put forward. The ideological ones have further compounded the linguistic problems of Nigeria as they affect overtly or covertly the behaviour of Nigerians towards the existing languages in general, and other Nigerians in particular. This trend does not augur well for national integration.

The solution to the numerous problems that arise as a result of the linguistic complexities

of Nigeria can, as Einar Haugen suggests, be found in planning. Haugen asserts that "planning is a human activity that arises from the need to find a solution to a problem..." (287). The planning referred to here is language planning (LP) which is defined as "the establishment of goals, policies and procedures for a language" (287). Weinstein quoted by Wardhaugh is of the opinion that:

Language planning is a government authorized, long-term, sustained, and conscious effort to alter a language's function in a society for the purpose of solving communication problems. (335)

Richard Wardhaugh views language planning as "an attempt to interfere deliberately with a language or one of its varieties" (335). Einar Haugen, Ayo Bamgbose, Augusta Omamor, among others, opine that language planning always arises from the evaluation of the linguistic background situation of a given community. Einar Haugen goes further to add that after having evaluated the linguistic background situation of the community, the language planner will offer:

A programme of action which may be analyzed into a goal, a policy that will lead to the attainment of the goal and specific procedures for the implementation of the policy. (287)

Language planning activity is goal oriented and the goals, as Augusta Omamor has shown, could be to improve the language or languages for aesthetic reasons or for more practical reasons of making them functionally relevant as tools for socio-cultural integration and effective administration. Ayo Bamgbose and

Wardhaugh see the goal of Language Planning as status planning or corpus planning.

3.0 THE WAY FORWARD

The prevailing issue of language planning in Nigeria is the problem of poor communication as a result of the existence of many different languages, dialects and registers. This is compounded equally, by the problems of the typical Nigerian's attitude to the existing varieties of codes and registers as a result of societal influences. This, for example, is manifested in the problem of non-reciprocal intelligibility even in languages which are clearly mutually intelligible to indigenous users. The linguistic squabble between the Efik and Ibibio people, Ibibio and Annang people and Ikwerre and Igbo people are good examples. Other examples abound in other parts of the country.

One of the end results of the differing language ordinances pursued by the colonial masters is the problem of the attitudinal complex which Nigerians have developed towards Nigerians from other ethnolinguistic groups and indigenous Nigerian languages. The Nigerian who stands to benefit a lot from the acquisition of the English language, (a legacy of colonialism), naturally regards his mother tongue and cultural heritage with disdain. The reason for this attitude as Peter Trudgill and Okon Essien have noted is because English "... has much more status and prestige..." and "... is highly valued by many people, and certain economic, social and political benefits tend to accrue to those who speak and write it" (Trudgill 19). It is now fashionable, especially in the southern part of Nigeria, to find homes where the medium of interaction is the English language. Children from such homes are not encouraged to acquire or learn their mother tongue. Rather, these children in turn, look down on speakers of their mother tongues and label these speakers as 'backward' or 'bush' people. The sense of pride and belonging which should have been cultivated and sustained, is in this circumstance, eroded. This negative attitude which reflects the social structure of the Nigerian society affects ultimately, the status and development of the indigenous Nigerian languages which are actually the languages of the masses. It also has an adverse effect on national integration by keeping people apart through the process of segregation as observed in the linguistic behaviour of the educated elites towards the masses.

The attitude of the government towards language related matters can at best be

described as laissez faire. Forty two years after independence, Nigeria has not formulated any policy on language. What the government has done so far is to regulate the use of language in official domains and in education as documented in Chapters V, Section 55: A908 and VI, Part II Section 97:A928 of the *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* and the *National Policy on Education*. The absence of a language policy in Nigeria has affected adversely the development of indigenous languages. It has in no small way contributed to the negative evaluation of the indigenous languages and the subsequent cultivation of unfavourable attitude towards them. Hounkpati Capo has rightly observed that:

The underdevelopment of indigenous Nigerian languages has contributed immensely to (the) marginalization of the indigenous population who are in the minority. (4)

The end result is that some indigenous ethnic nationalities who feel they have been marginalized expend time, energy and money, as Hounkpati Capo has also observed, to:

engage in a struggle for full participation in the decision making process, so that they may exercise their economic, social, cultural and political rights. (4)

Nigeria's history of inter-group relation has not been as violent as it has become in recent times. The violent nature of inter-group relations has heightened language related conflicts in the country. These inter-group and language related conflicts include the Efik and Ibibio conflict as recorded in Akwa Ibom State, the Jukun and Tiv conflict of Taraba State, the Itsekiri and Urhobo conflict of Delta State and the Ijaw and Yoruba conflict between Edo and Ekiti States. We, therefore, believe that these conflicts have terrifying implications on the nation's stability and have certainly been detrimental to national integration. These conflicts have led to the displacement of otherwise indigenous ethnic groups in some states in Nigeria. For example, the Efiks in Ikot Offiong in Itu Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State have been forced out of their homeland and have had to seek refuge in neighbouring Efik villages and towns in Cross River State. This trend according to news reports has also been noticed in Benue State where some Tivs who were otherwise resident in Taraba State have had to relocate to Tiv land in Benue State for security reasons. Situations like this have heightened the animosity that existed between the ethnolinguistic groups involved in the

conflicts. Worst still, the scars left by them may continue to ignite more struggles in the future if they are not checked now. In the Nigerian situation, therefore, the categories of status activities which according to R. Wardhaugh would "change the function of a language or a variety of a language and the rights of those who use it", and corpus activities which would seek:

to develop a variety of a language or a language, usually to standardize it, ... to provide it with the means for serving every possible language function in society. (335)

are necessary goals for language planning.

In a rather complex linguistic situation like the one prevalent in Nigeria, language planning activities should be extended to reach as many languages as possible. This will enable the language planners, especially the government, to satisfy the linguistic demands of the nation for the purpose of integration. Status and corpus planning activities for the languages in Nigeria will not only promote and sustain them, they will also help endangered languages and thus, enhance national integration, pride and identity. We find Olasope Oyelaran's assertion, that if the government wants to achieve a total mobilization of the people of Nigeria, "it must reach the people in languages they already speak" (29) very relevant in Nigeria. He goes further to advise that the government must also mobilize all the resources at its disposal to understand the languages the people speak.

4.0 CONCLUSION

To conclude this paper, we wish to point out that the relevance of language in national integration cannot be overemphasised. The linguistic geography of Nigeria is common knowledge amongst linguists and others who are interested in language. This makes it more of an academic knowledge than general knowledge. We believe that much publicity should be given to the linguistic geography of Nigeria. There should also be attempts at publicizing the relationships that exist amongst the plethora of languages in Nigeria. This is particularly necessary because as Okon Essien has pointed out, multilingualism in some areas of Nigeria has been exaggerated. He asserts that:

... in view of mutual intelligibility and the fact that sometimes, one language is

referred to by more than one name, the number of languages ... is fewer than what is often presumed, (28).

The information provided will help speakers of languages and their varieties to be aware of the inter-relationship that exist between the varieties of languages. This should go a long way in solving the problem of non-reciprocal intelligibility amongst users of a language and its varieties. Information on the inter-relatedness of languages will help put a check on attitudinal factors in language issues.

The knowledge of linguistics has helped us to know that no language is better than the other, though some languages are richer in their vocabulary and as such can be used in more communication settings than others. The languages which are deficient lexically and semantically can be developed and thus improved on to meet the demands of modernity and technological advancement. Developing the indigenous Nigerian languages will promote them and raise them from their marginalized positions to positions of relevance in the society. Like Ben Elugbe, we believe that:

one of the advantages of developing the vast majority of our languages is that nobody will be left out of the development process. More importantly, nobody will think or feel that he is being left out. (15)

Developing the indigenous languages will enable the government to 'speak' to the people in languages they are competent in and it will aid in the promotion of the politics of accommodation in such a way that each ethnolinguistic group will still preserve its ethnic identity and still contribute to the enhancement of a national culture and identity. We, like Ben Elugbe are of the opinion that doing this will go a long way in promoting national integration as a "feeling of belonging is cultivated in those who feel that they are not left out of the scheme of things". (15)

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