

Language as a Tool for National Integration: A Case Study of English Language in Nigeria

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Abstract

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 in multilingual and multi-ethnicity societies like Nigeria. The latter trend can destabilize a nation as it sets different linguistic groups against one another in attempt to carve out an identity for themselves and express their existence and or relevance to the society. In Nigeria, where language has been the sole factor in group integration and at times, disintegration, this scenario can be found. The objective of the study therefore, is to examine the language issues in Nigeria by exploring the unifying importance of the English Language in Nigeria. This unifying role and its allied issues are discussed in this write-up with a view to portraying that the imposition or adoption of any language outside English as the Nation's official language would lead to catalogue of socio-political crisis that could threaten the corporate existence of Nigeria. The study reveals that leaving English Language to continue to serve as the nation's official language will not only maintain the oneness and integration in the country but will continue to solidify the togetherness and commonality of the nation. The study, therefore suggests that the English language should continue to play its unifying role while we continue to develop and maintain our local and indigenous languages.

Introduction

Language issue has been a prevalent and pervasive problems Nigeria has. Language is the vehicle through which people's culture, norms, values and beliefs are transmitted from generation to generation for its perpetuation. It therefore remains a central factor in the determination of the overall status of a nation. It is an index of identity which serves as a repository of a people's culture, industry and exploits. 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 extension enhancing social stability and development. The most effective engine of people's culture is language. In other words, language is the indicator of history and self identification (Solanke 2006). Nwadike (2004:5) as cited in Olaoye (2013:748) "posits that it is the key to the heart of people. If we lose the key, we lose the people. If we treasure the key and keep it safe, it will unlock the door to wealth or affluence, thus bringing about national development." National development refers to the growth of the nation in terms of internal cohesion, integration, unity, economic well-being, mass participation in governments and educational growth. (Aziza, 1998).

According to Isayev (1977:10) as cited in Yusuf (2012:898) "language is a nation's most important asset. There is no such thing as a nation without a common linguistic basis." The dominant inference to Isayev's observation is that for national integration, cohesion and development to thrive, there must be language capable and acceptable by all in the administration / running of a nation's affairs.

Multilingualism is a common place in Nigeria just like most African countries. The problem of “forging ahead”, a condition that makes every language compete among themselves and struggle for national recognition or official status, whether it is indigenous or foreign always comes up. But it is only one language that must be recognized as official language of the country; that is the language of administration and education at some level and also the language of relevance for unifying the nation. It is either by commission or omission, accident or design, fortunately or unfortunately that English language has emerged as that privilege language without which, the unity of Nigeria as a nation is most improbable, if not rightly impossible.

This study tries to examine how the English language, among other functions in Nigeria, unities the nation. Discussed in the paper are its unifying roles and its allied issues with a view to showing that the imposition or adoption of any language other than English as the nation’s official language would lead to a situation of chaos in the country: According to Igboanusi (2002) as quoted by Yusuf (2012:898) “If you insist, the union will be dissolved. It would mean that you have kindled a fire which all the waters of oceans cannot put out, but which seas of blood can only extinguish.”

Nigeria is a multilingual nation where an estimate of about 516 languages are spoken of which Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba are the major languages with about 20 million speakers each. In the sixteenth century, the British introduced English in Nigeria with the establishment of trading contacts on the West African Coast. The result was in a form of Nigerian pidgin, which probably is the predecessor of present-day Nigeria English pidgin, which is mainly used for inter-ethnic communication. It was from the middle of the nineteenth century that English was formally studied in Nigeria. It

has now a geographical spread throughout the country as it is used in predominantly formal settings such as government, education, literature, business, commerce, media, international communication and even as a lingual franca in social interaction among the educated elite. Furthermore, it is treated as the official language of the nation, though, there is no government written law or decree spelling this out.

What is Language?

According to Richard and Plat (1992:15), “language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication”. Wilson (1986) views it from another angle. To them, language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbol by means of which a social group cooperates. The above definitions prominently point out that language is a system. According to a system, sounds join to form words. The alphabets b, a, t, joint to form a meaningful word ‘bat’ whereas a combination of t, b, a, ‘tba’ do not for any meaningful combinations.

In word formation, convention makes them part of a system. According to these systems, words also join to form sentences. For instance, words also join to form sentences. For instance, a sentence like. (goat eats yam) is acceptable but one cannot accept a string of words like (yam eats goat). So, this is in line with the school of thought that language is believed to be a system of systems.

Language is a symbol system based on pure or arbitrary conventions ... infinitely extendable. Extendable and modifiable according to the changing needs and conditions of the speaker (Yule 1985:18). This definition shows that language is a symbol system. That is to say that every language that exists in the written form selects some symbols for its selected sounds. The English

sound /k/ for example has the symbol k while the Hindi sound /k/ has the symbol /dh/ for it. These symbols form the alphabet of the language and join in different combinations according to a well laid out system to form meaningful words (Yusuf 2012:899).

It is the system of arbitrariness that is being portrayed here in the sense that there is no one to one correspondence between the structure of a word and the thing it stands for. The combination p.a.n. (pan) for instance stands in English for an instrument used for frying something. Why could it not be n.a.p or a.p.n? That is to show that there is nothing sacrosanct about the combination p.a.n. except that it has now become a convention which cannot be easily changed.

Language conventions are not easily changed as stated here, yet it is not impossible to do so. Language is infinitely modifiable and extendable. Words continue to change meanings and new words continue to be added to language with the changing needs of the community using it.

In the words of Sapir (1921:16), “language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols”. There are two terms in this definition that call for discussion. They are ‘human’ and ‘non-instinctive’. Language is human means that only human beings possess language. Animals do have a system of communication but it is not a developed system. This is the reason why language is said to be species – specific. Equally, language is not hereditary. In this sense, it is non-instinctive. Children have to learn language more especially the language of the society he is born into.

Brown (1987:4) has this to say “language is the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols. Rightly,

this definition gives more prominence to that fact that language is primarily speech produced by oral-auditory symbols. A speaker produces some strings of oral sounds that get conveyed through the air to the speaker who, through his hearing organs, receives the sound waves and conveys these to the brain that interprets these symbols to arrive at a meaning.

Encyclopedia Britanica (2002:6) posits that “language is a system of conventional spoken or written symbols by means of which humans, as members of a social group and participants in its culture communicate. Chomsky (1957:5) sees language as “a set of finite or infinite sentences. Each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements.” Chomsky means to convey that each sentence has a structure. The human brain is competent enough to construct different sentences from out of the limited set of sound symbols belonging to a particular language. Human brain is so productive that a child can at any time produce a sentence that has never been said or heard earlier.

Conclusively therefore, language is seen as a system of communication used by humans in a specific linguistic community/society.

The Place of English Language in Nigeria

A good knowledge of the socio-political history of Nigeria will enable one understand how English language came into Nigeria and occupied a colossal position in the country. Nigeria is made up of multilingual and multi-ethnic nationals welded together for the benefit of the colonial administration. English language was then adopted as a language of necessity to enable the British run their colonial government. Clerks and interpreters were trained and those who wished to work with the colonial masters strived to learn English.

The missionaries were the first to establish schools in Nigeria. Their main aim then was to train people who will propagate the gospel. When the British government took over the running of the schools in Nigeria, they harmonized the subjects taught in the different missionary schools. They also came up with a policy that made English language a core subject as well as the language of instruction in the 1882 and 1887 education ordinances (Njoku and Izuagba 2001) in Njoku (2017:218).

From this point, many Nigerians strove to learn English, as competence in it was a meal ticket. In fact, it was a yard stick for employment during the colonial era. After independence, the Nigerian system of education did not change much from what it was during the colonial era. English language remained the pivot of education, commerce and industry in Nigeria. It is the language of instruction from upper primary education through secondary, to tertiary education in Nigeria. It is the language through which all other subjects in the curriculum are taught. Not only is English language a compulsory subject in secondary education, a credit pass in it is a compulsory condition for securing admission into Nigerian tertiary institutions. Competence in English is seen as an index of academic excellence. Thus, it is a yardstick for measuring learner's academic performance. Moreso, before any student can graduate from the tertiary institutions in Nigeria, he must pass the course 'Use of English'. From the foregoing, we have seen that English language is the bedrock upon which Nigerian and its educational system is tinged, which the nation cannot do without. Suffice it then to say that English language is indispensable in Nigeria.

Importance of English Language in Nigeria

As mentioned earlier, English is the language of education in Nigeria. Every form of education is expressed and acquired through English language. It is through English language that formal education is acquired in Nigeria. In other words, it is through English language that the skills and knowledge needed for human development is acquired. Therefore, by extension, English language is a primary instrument for human development in Nigeria. The benefits of education acquired via English language are enormous, viz: improved social relations, better job opportunities, higher productivity, access to better health facility, improved standard of living and ability to participate in the life of the community.

Besides these benefits, English language has conferred on Nigerians other privileges that bear on human development as well as national development, both on the home front and on the global scene. On the home front, English language is essentially regarded as a unifying factor. It has allowed Nigerians to co-exist peacefully even in their diversity. It is this peaceful co-existence that engenders development either on individual or national basis.

Considering the multilingual nature of the country, the communication crises that would have occurred among people from different linguistic background is bridged by the use of English. It is possible for Nigerians irrespective of their ethnic background, to study or work in any part of the country. The same goes for teachers or workers who could also choose to teach / work in any part of the country without fear of language barrier.

English language has advanced Nigerians economically. Locally, people engage in trading and other business activities to increase their economic power and improve their standard of living. This has been successful because of the use of English.

Globally, people engage in interactional businesses facilitated by the use of English. Again, the status of English as a second language in Nigeria has attracted foreign investment. According to Euromonitor, the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows from the English speaking countries such as USA and UK are typically higher in the countries that use English as their second language. Thus, Nigeria has benefitted in this regard because of their use of English. Examples of such foreign investors are: Mobil, Shell, Nexen in the oil and gas sector, other sectors that are boosting the nation's economy are: information technology (IT) services, banking and telecommunications. As stated in the Euromonitor (2010:8). "Companies such as MTN communication and Microsoft have found that both Nigeria and Pakistan offer a more attractive business environment than many other countries as a result of these countries higher levels of English proficiency among other factors."

This confirms the fact that improved English language skills help to attract more foreign investments. These investments in turn create more job and career opportunities for Nigeria. Euromonitor report also confirms that Nigerians believe that learning English in particular, offers great opportunity for career advancement and higher pay. In affirmation to this statement, Olofin (2012:28) opines, "Before any Nigerian can occupy any position of eminence today, he must be English compliant". He further asserts that promotions and ability to advance one's career through national and international communication is tied to one's education and particularly to one's ability to speak good English. This is in line with Osuafor's (2002:23) assertion that "people who could speak and write English had more chances of being employed than those who could not".

English language provides a link to the global world. Being a major language of communication in the global world, it offers the people of this nation the benefit of participating in global affairs. Access to adequate information is gained on a global level. English language has also assisted technological development in Nigeria. Ike (2007) avers that English language is the window to the world of science and technology. It is the language used in space science and computing technology. There is easy knowledge transfer now in quantities and at speed unimaginable in the past. There is digital communication of massive data bases via the internet, smart phones, fax machines, television, print media and so on. One can easily connect to databases anywhere in the world from the comfort of his room. Most organizations, industries and parastatals have gone digital. It makes administration easy and provides easier method for storing and retrieving information. Nigerians are active participants in this digital world because of their knowledge of English language

English Language in the Multilingual Nigeria Context

According to Ndimele (2003) multilingualism is a situation in which two or more languages operate within the same context. Factors such as political annexation, marital relation, economic transaction, cultural association, educational acquisition and religious affiliation bring about multilingualism.

The advent of English colonialists in the 18th century brought about linguistic imperialism, a situation in which Fanilola (1988:8) posits

“The minds and lives of the speakers of a language are dominated by another language to the point where they believe they can and should use only the foreign language when it comes to transaction dealing with the advanced

aspects of life such as education, philosophy, literature, government, the administration of justice.”

When Nigeria attained her political independence in 1960, this has to be sustained for her interest. The reason being because there was no indigenous language that could perform the function of English because of the mutual suspicion of, and ethnic consciousness among virtually all Nigerians. The truth was revealed at the height of all about the new state of the notion; that not indigenous language is acceptable for all Nigerians. Nida and Wonderly (1971:65) assert that “In Nigeria, there is simply no politically neutral language. In fact, the division into three major regions reflects the three poles. Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba”. The political survival of Nigeria as a nation would even be more seriously threatened, that is if any of these three languages were promoted by the government as being the one national language.

English as a Unifying Tool for National Integration in Nigeria

Generally speaking, out of the entire heritage left behind in Nigeria by the British at the end of colonial administration, probably, none is more important than the English language. It is now the language of government, business and commerce, education, the mass media, literature and much internal as well as external communication.

The most important language of the world is English language. This is because it is the first language of the United Nations and arguably the only language spoken in all nations of the world. It helps in promoting nurturing and uniting the Nigerian Nation over the years and even now.

One can say that English is the language of integration in Nigeria. Amongst the compounding complexity of Nigeria, especially in relation to the language question, the only language

that indexes the spirit of togetherness is English. More often than not, activities conducted in indigenous languages reprobated as being ethnic or tribal, except in cultural celebrations or entertainment displays. This explains why even during the first republic and even the colonial period, when English has not reached its present level of ascendancy in national and international affairs, political parties were formed in English. The parties must have regional bases, however; the fact that they were named in English entailed their collective import. The Northern People's Congress (NPC), the Action Group (AG), the National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) after the excision of Southern Cameroon, National Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) etc were formed to integrate all Nigerian and give them a sense of belonging. This trend has necessarily survived until today with all the national political parties formed and sloganeered in English.

The integration role is not limited to political parties alone but virtually all strata of Nigerian life. In sports, the function of English as its language gives room for integration, as it remains the only area where the syndrome of ethnicity or tribalism has not permeated. Most Nigerians never care whether the national team is made up of members of the same family, not to talk of an ethnic group, as long as they can deliver the goals or goods. The use of English facilitates the absence of ethnic sentiments in this regard.

English is generally acceptable by all, even to those who clamour against its irresistible dominance. The language is not fraught with suspicions in any formal or literate context. It is the only language that does not generate suspicions of having a skeleton in one's cupboard or a hidden agenda in inter-ethnic relationship or transactions. According to Bamgbose (1991:3) "English also serves as the language of nationalism concerned with political integration and efficiency."

English language brings all supposed ‘nations’ of Nigeria to function as one. Mention is often made of each ethnic group being a nation on its own with the Igbo nation, the Hausa nation, the Yoruba nation, the Edo nation, just to mention but these few as examples. Nevertheless, the cohesion of all under the subsuming Nigerian nation is possible through English. In other words, without English, the ubiquitous violent ethnic groups like Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) Egbesu Boys, The Arewa People’s Congress (APC), Ijaw Youth Solidarity (IYS) and other militant groups would have found more justification for desiring to secede from the Nigerian federation.

English language is also ironically the language of nationalism. It is because the love for the country as a whole has to be manifested through the language intelligible to all and sundry, lest the ‘ethnic agenda’ be implicated. This reason accounts for why nationalists like Herbert Macaulay, Obafemi Awolowo, Ahamadu Bello, Nnamdi Azikiwe had to use English language as a weapon of nationalist struggle. A nationalist bases his patriotic views in English. If English is not used to express the same ideas for which he is known as nationalist, he becomes an ethnic jingoist or a tribal apologist (Yusuf 2012:900).

The National Youth Service Corps (N.Y.S.C) is aimed at bringing together Nigerian Youths with a view to reinforcing the sentiment of oneness. The constitution of Nigeria is written in English to create a level ground for all Nigerians to play. Writing in English by Nigerian literary artists has also created a distinctive Nigerian literature marked by its own characteristics imbued with features of inter-cultural communication and cooperation. English is also the language of international relations and diplomacy – the language that mirrors Nigeria to the world. All these have the effects of reducing what Adegbite (2004:2) refers to as “deep

rooted mutual suspicions that result in prejudice, stereotypes and subtle linguistic hostility among various linguistic groups.” And in fact, there are obvious national symbols such as National Flag, The National Anthem, The National Day/Independence day, National Worker’s day, the National Associations as well as several national monuments of which are designed in English and all of which ‘assert’ that English is the foundation of the magnificent structure called Nigeria. If English is removed, it is feared that the whole nation may automatically crumble.

The Meditative function of English Language

English language should play the function of meditation in the face of the multilingual crises in Nigeria. As Obuasi (2006:14) has it, ‘a common language is a mark of identification and a necessary powerful tool for unity for national consciousness – nationalism. We need a common language. We should allow English unite us by accepting it like the views of Adegbite (2004:2) which supports our views here that, “English should serve an expected coordinating role as a means of inter ethnic and international communication...”’

Adebayo (2003:1) gives a chief reason why English should serve as a mediator between people of different ethnic languages in Nigeria. “It is because the youths who are mostly cosmopolitan by birth, with usually mixed identity and who suffer, for no fault of theirs, from this unclear identity in quest for social mobility, vent out their anger at a federation that cares for them.”

Knowledge of English is thus an indispensable requirement for anyone to rise or live in any place under the context of the community, no matter the variety of the English. By this we mean varieties which have been influenced according to goal, geographical dispensation and mother tongue. It is this local

texture of English language that provides the in-going and out-going varieties for inter-ethnic communication and gives the individuals the sense of oneness, unity and loyalty. Even the formal English as taught and learnt in formal settings (classrooms) invariably have the local texture – not used as the English man uses it.

Language is dynamic. This means that it lives and grows. The tones and pronunciation of native speakers are different, resulting to dialects and eventual isoglosses. Even connotation of words acquires strength as the uses go, depending on use and environment, not to talk of placement of stress shift.

In vocabulary and grammar, we use certain styles such as acquiring – a method of translating our expressions as is usual without indigenous languages e.g Headtie (Scarfs) describing the piece of cloth tied on the head, ‘bush meat’ for game; ‘machine’ for motorcycle, ‘chewing stick’ for piece of stick chewed for cleaning teeth etc. there are other forms of translations and mother tongue influence that give Nigerian English new words and or add meaning to existing ones e.g.

- He is a bush man – He is unrefined
- Give me my change –can I have my balance?
- He impregnated the girl – He put the girl in a family way etc

The major function of language is communication and social identity for human co-existence. Because language is dynamic, growth of any language can lead to birth of a new one. Nigerian English is a domesticated localized variety. This variety is bound to have peculiarities according to the socio-cultural and political environment. As English is our new historical symbol of federalism and nationalism, we should incontestably use it for the Nigerian nation. We should domesticate it and get integrated.

Conclusion

Conclusively, this study has investigated how English functions as the language of unity and integration in Nigeria and forms the basis of the nation's linguistic existence. It is contended that with controversies surrounding the adoption of any of the Nigerian languages and the grave implications such adoption engenders, English language saves the day as the nation's lingua franca. It integrates all Nigerians as a cohesive entity. It is acceptable to all (to some grudgingly), and it serves the purpose of nationism and nationalism at the same time as it lessens the feelings of perceived intra-national linguistic domination by majority groups.

For the unity of Nigeria to be sustained, it is ultimately suggested that the English language must continue to play its unifying role for the essentially necessary national integration while we continue in our bid to develop and maintain our local and indigenous languages so as not to destroy the beauty of our natural endowment and heritage.

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