

Multilingualism: A Threat to Nigerian Unity

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Abstract

The term multilingualism can be defined as a process whereby members of the community unconsciously or consciously acquire more than one language. It can also be seen as the use of two or more languages for the purpose of communication in a particular speech community. Therefore, Nigeria is a very good example of multilingual society. This paper therefore, introspects how multilingualism possess the problem of insecurity to the state of Nigeria.

Keywords: Language, Multilingualism, National Security, Unity, Language Policy.

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Introduction

Language is one of the essential gifts given to man by God. This is because of its "magical and mystical power" and "unique role in capturing the breath of human thought and endeavor" (Crystal 1987.1). There are over four thousand (4,000) to five thousand (5,000) languages including many more dialects globally. Therefore language appears to be most essential endowment. Man uses language to understand himself and his environment. It is also used to resolve some of the problems and tensions which arise in the course of man's interaction and national reconstruction. For instance, through language, some vital issues of human rights, respect and tolerance, politics, democracy, federal character, good governance are being raised and discussed.

However, languages are constantly torn between the opposing forces of disintegration and decomposition as well as differentiation and homogenization. In fact, centrifugal force towards every increasing diversity emerge from the relationship between language and culture. On the other hand, the opposite force of centripetal standardization and reduction of language diversity, is itself external to language.

The most fundamental and clear characteristics of human language anywhere in the world, is its diversity. All languages differ according to the characteristics of the speaker, the hearer and the context. Any reflexion on human language as a social reality must begin with variety and diversity as its primary terms. Though Crystal (1987.1) states that all languages are equal, but many language speakers/ owners most of the time claim that their language are superior to others. Basically, all languages perform the same function; communication, information, social interaction, entertainment, politics, thinking, learning etc. But in Nigeria for instance, there over four thousand ethnic groups with diverse languages/ dialects, but only three (Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba) are chosen as national languages. In other words, numerous others are relegated to become inferior. Thus, this multilingualism possess a lot of problems to individual people of Nigeria as well as the nation at large.

National Security

According to Wikipedia, security is freedom from, or resilience against potential harm (or other unwanted coercive change) caused by others. Security can be of persons or social groups, objects and institutions, ecosystems or any other entity or phenomena vulnerable to unwanted change.

Francis(2005:10), defines security as "a state of being safe and absence of fear, anxiety, anger, poverty and oppression". Security refers to the desire for safety or protection.

On the other hand, according to United Nations, national security is the ability of a country to improve the social welfare of the people. Example, by providing social amenities like equal education, potable water, transportation, infrastructure, medical care among others.

Different kinds of national securities include, economic security, energy security, health security, women's security, environmental security etc.

Nigerian Language Policy

Language policy is very important in any country's political system. This policy guides the general public towards language to be used in different situations. Language policy is given by the government through the issuance of a white paper on statement's provision in national documents, Akindele and Adegbuta (1999.p.45), the constitution of Nigeria (179/1989/1999) and National policy on education (NPE 1977, revised 1981,1998) are typical examples. The above mentioned documents state among other things, a national policy on language use in government, education, politics etc

Some provisions in these documents include:

1. Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community and as a later stage, English.
2. NPE para 15(4): Primary Education in selecting two Nigerian language of their own three main Nigerian languages: Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba subject to availability of teachers. NPE para 19 (14). Junior secondary.
3. The business of national assembly shall be conducted in English and in Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba, when adequate arrangements have been made–1999 constitution.
4. Section 55.... The business of the House of Assembly shall be conducted in English, but the House may in addition to English conduct the business of the languages or more other languages spoken in the state as the House may be resolution approved 1999 constitution.
5. Section 97.... In addition to appreciating the importance of a language in the education process, and as a means of preserving the people's culture, the government considers it to be in the interest of the national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other

than his own mother tongue. In this condition, the government considered the three major languages in Nigeria to be Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. NPE paragraph 8.

6. government will ensure that the medium of instruction principally should be the mother-tongue or language of the immediate community. NPE paragraph 15(14) primary education.

7. A policy is formulated in the line with the objectives of a nation and its national ideology. For examples, it is guided by such general principles as democracy, unity and national integration, culture preservation and enrichment, social justice and foreign relations.

National Development

Development is a process that creates growth, brings in progress and a positive change.

(https://sid_Isreal.org) defines development as a process that creates, progress, positive change or the addition of physical, economic, environmental, social and demographic components.

Development is the act of improving by expanding, enlarging or refining.

(<https://www.vocabulary.com>)

On the other hand, national development is the improvement of a nation, economically, socially and politically to better the standard of living for the country's population. It is the growth of a nation in terms of internal cohesion, integration, unity, economic well-being, mass participation in government as well as educational growth.

National development is the capacity of the country to raise the standard of living of its residents. It can be properly measured through the qualitative advancement of the lives of the citizens of a country. In other words, it can be achieved by providing individuals with basic livelihood required (social amenities), and by the provision of employment opportunities.

The components of national development include:

- I. Development of rural areas: That is supplying the rural dwellers with comfortable environment.
- II. Increase in agriculture outputs: This can be achieved by the modernization of agricultural practices.
- III. Exposing the masses to economic growth and values.
- IV. Expansion of urban areas

V. Poverty eradication

However, before a nation will rise up to this "Glorious Feat", there must be unity among all the ethnic groups.

Concept of Multilingualism

Multilingualism simply means a situation one speaks more than two languages. It also represents a linguistic situation whereby more than two languages exist in a speech community. This speech community may consist of few groups of people, state or country. Crystal (2011.3) asserts that multilingualism is used in sociolinguistic to refer to a speech community which makes use of two or more languages. Multilingualism is believed to be natural. This is because, it is linked to the story in the Holy Bible when God confounded the tongue of men and scattered them all over the world. Genesis chapter eleven (11:1-9)

And the whole earth was of one language and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journey from the east that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there. And they said one to another, go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slim had they for mortar. And they say, go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth. Go to let us go down and confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth and they left off to build the city.

From the above story in the Holy Bible, we believe that linguistic diversity is the curse of Babel. Prior to the incident, people were one, spoke the same language, understood one another, and had unity of purpose.

Another concept of multilingualism is based on various eco- political factors employed by the colonialist to carve out large domains for exploitation and trade. For instance the British colonialist carved out Nigeria from many ethnic groups who have different cultures and diverse religious. Thus, the centre refuses to hold according to Achebe. The amalgamation of these different communities into larger groups in Africa by European powers was for easy administration and for trade Cape (1980) regrets that there was no attempt made to identify administrative frontiers through language. According to him, this gave rise to multinational and multilingual communities in Africa. He asserts

African languages are not necessarily confined to administrative frontiers. In Nigeria for instance, no case has been reported where the boundaries of a given language coincide with those of a district, local government area

or state... Nigeria shares eight languages with Benin Republic, sixteen with Cameroon, three with Chad and five with Niger.

Consequently, the colonial masters at the period from 1947 to 1963 created more problems for Nigerians in attempt to solve the existing problem by dividing, Nigeria into three regions. Then, they imposed three languages upon these carved out religious. This generated the tendency for speakers of other languages in the locality to learn that specific language out of necessity. For instance, Yoruba was controlling language in Bendel even when other localities in the region have their own languages. Then, Igbo was the controlling language in Anambra, Imo, Rivers, Akwalbom and Cross River states and Hausa language in Benue and Kwara state of course, this did not solve language problems in all the regions, rather the problem of dominance arose.

Type of Multilingualism

I. Co- ordinate Multilingualism

In this type of multilingualism, speakers can be grown-ups or children who acquire two or more languages simultaneously by reason of their environment. For instance, Igbo children born in the western part of the country can grow up speaking Igbo and Yourba. Likewise their adults because of necessity can also learn Yourba to function well in the environment. According to Onigbo (2009:121) Co-ordinator bilingualism apparently represents a situation where an individual speaks and understands the language so well that it may be difficult to classify one as one's mother tongue and the other as his second language.

II. Subordinate Multilingualism

In this case, speakers are probably able to speak foreign or official language fluently at the detriment of their own language where they exhibit abysmal incompetence. For example, some children from Igbo origin can speak English language fluently more than Igbo language.

III. Compound Multilingualism

Here, people are pushed to learn other languages because of their new environment. For example, workers who are transferred to another tribe, in order to communicate well in their environment, have to learn their language. Even for their children to be able to mix up with other children in that community would learn the new language. According to Kamalu (2015:407), in this type of multilingualism, people are not concerned with the level of competence, attained in each of the multilingual languages, but an interlingual problem for their attempt to master the target language.

Problem of Multilingualism

Language is considered as one of the least visible, least measurable and least understood aspects of discrimination which can easily be squeezed out by a proper and understandable focus on structural and institutionalized force. Roberts et al (1992.36) notwithstanding, language is a powerful instrument of control which can be used globally to maintain power relationships. It is seen as the primary consideration in the discussion of politics among ethnic groups. Communication is an essential aspect of power, and language and culture go, hand in hand. They are major factors frequently used implicitly in decision- making by the governance over the governed.

According to Robert et Al (1992.371), "people sustain existing power relationships by misunderstanding each other's intent, talking past each other, opting out of the effort involved in listening to another perspective and accommodating it or being, simply uncomfortable with difference without thinking through why they are"

The Modernization and the maxists school of thought (Dunmoye 1984), tribalism and primordialism arise as direct consequences of given socio- cultural differences in the context of modernization. In reference to Dunmoye's view, because of the pluralistic nature of Nigeria; where there are over four hundred (400) ethnic groups with uncommon religion, different culture, different believes people of the state find it very difficult to stay together. This is exactly why Elugbe (1990) states that "most Nigerias view Nigeria's linguistic map with dismay and make language a ready scapegoat for Nigeria's lack of internal unity and cohesion. The above statement supports the belief that multilingualism is not a natural state of affairs and that it has some negative implications. According to Bamgbose (1991), it is the search for proper national integration that makes African countries to look for symbols that could reinforce the sentiment of oneness and language. He further opined:

Since language is often associated with ethnicity, fostering national integration is usually seen as de-emphasizing multiplicity of languages, just as building a nation is seen as synonyms with braking down ethnic loyalties. The association of multilingualism with diviseness is unjustified, since language is only a convenient scapegoat on which the real causes of diviseness are usually hung (7).

The Nigerian example shows a clear illustration, especially when the condition of the country is viewed from the soci-political events in this present time. One would assert that language difference has been the major reason for insecurity in the country.

Dunmoye (1984.126) believes, that ordinarily, ethnic consciousness (language) in itself does not pose any threat to political stability or to national development, but it "becomes dysfunctional to the political system and beclouds class consciousness when it degenerates into ethnic aggressiveness or a group behavior that is patterned by competition and conflict, rather than along the lines of mutual cooperation and peaceful coexistence...

Actually, Nigerian multilingual nature has degenerates to violence. The frequent religious killings and ethnic violence resulting in death of numerous Nigerians across the nation are all consequences of political, social and cultural composition of the people of Nigeria. The failure to resolve economic and social problems since post- Independence in Nigeria has given birth to more awareness and brought about several questions, on the soci-political structure of the country. The surge of debate on the restructuring of the country is as a result of negligence of some people from different language settings, the fragile political stability, and the lack of confidence for the future.

For this reason also, many ethnic groups have emerged from all over the nation; indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB). Movement of Oduduwa Republic, Arewa Youths, Movement of Niger Delta, Middle Belt and numerous others to defend their different ethnic groups. The activities of all these groups have caused a serious insecurity in the country. Infact, the difference in the entire language groups in the country with different values and cultures have weakened the central unity and create more crises than unity. Furthermore, the quest and desire to achieve the interest separate groups with different means of fighting have always created fear and anxiety to the people of Nigeria and create security challenges all over the country.

Multilingualism has also caused divisions among our legislators, who looked upon by an ordinary Nigerian to enact laws that can ooze the anxiety and fear of insecurity on the people. According to Soviet philosopher, Igor kohn in Ismagilova (1978)

A problem...arise when these real and imagined differences are elevated into the main thing and converted into a hostile psychological attitude to some ethnic group, an attitude that estranges people and it's psychologically and theoretically generalized as policy of discrimination (81)

According to Igor kohn, the politics of language has actually entered into Nigerian legislators and even the judiciary and this has estranges sorry ethnic groups psychologically and theoretically because of certain politics of discrimination. They have formed ethnic click seeking for interest of their different ethnic groups. People's rights and positions have been averted because of where they

come from or the language they speak. Some ethnic groups are preferred and considered more than others. Things have surely fallen apart when the centre could not hold, according to Chinua Achebe. Instead of enacting appropriate laws to meet the grievance of offences committed by insurgents, they becomes bias and avert the judgement.

This menace has also crimped into our judiciary where judgement, are passed based on the ethnic group of the accused. Values and cultures have weakened the central unity and create more crises than unity. Furthermore, the quest and desire to achieve the interest separate groups with different means of fighting have always created fear and anxiety to the people of Nigeria and therefore create security challenges all over the country.

Multilingualism has also caused divisions among our legislators, who are looked upon by an ordinary Nigerian to enact laws that can ooze the anxiety and fear of insecurity on the people. According to Soviet philosopher, Igor Kohn in Ismagilova (1978) of membership of a given language group, the level of economic and political development of the society is adversely affected, if not crippled.

Effective Utilization of Multilingualism in Nigeria

Multilingualism can also be viewed in a positive direction. It has numerous positive benefits to an individual and to the nation at large.

These benefits include:

- Availability of multiple employments
- It creates an opportunity for diversity found in human cultures
- It improves a personal working memory
- Creation of more friends
- It promotes business opportunities
- It increases personal experience
- Ability to adjust in any environment
- Reduction of fear and anxiety

Conclusion

With the above mentioned benefits of multilingualism and many others, one can understand that it is not evil if well managed. Using the understanding and utilizing the multilingual riches among the

various groups of people approach, the writer asserts that if this language situation that exists in Nigeria is well managed, there would not only be diversity in language, but in development. According to Agbedo (2009:2), "language is the pivot on which all human activities ranging from the most prosaic to the most profound revolve".

Language is used as means of better exploring and understanding various learning possibilities. According to Barnes, language is not the same as thought but it allows us to reflect. It is an instrument and the institution of culture. Therefore, the effective collection of the rich potentials of different languages as a nation will be a great advantage to national development. Then the diversity of language in the nation will rather become a blessing than a curse.

Chumbo (1984:27) stresses that "education and training in whatever form requires impacting knowledge and skills as well as awakening and developing potentials of the learner. This can be done through language".

Through language, ideas, values, feelings and goals are being transmitted from one person to another. These ideas and values may include security, nation building, development, politicking, and so on. In contrary to the problems meted to Nigerians via multilingualism, difference in language has, different individuals and some groups have harnessed immensely the benefit of multilingualism. For this reason, it is also possible as a nation, that if the correct approach is used, a functional benefit including that of security can be achieved. In conclusion, language which causes series of insecurity in Nigeria, if well managed, can resolve the security challenges, hence bringing enormous benefits to the entire nation.

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