

## **The Question of a National Language in National Development**

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**Abstract:** *The question of non-indigenous national language has occupied a more central position in our national development planning. Ethno linguistic pluralism has been at the base of Nigerian's political life since amalgamation in 1914. This is confirmed by the colonial policy, which demarcated the country along this ethno linguistic pluralism. This in part has created political and economic instability in Nigeria federation. This development actually gave rise to the issue of a National language exemplified in our perspective, National Language Policy on Education (1981). But, should we accept that our political separation is inherent in the existence of linguistic pluralism? The problem of Language in National Development constitutes the main thrust of this paper. While agreeing that language promotes loyalty and internal cohesion and serves as a rallying point for the process of nation building, however, language alone cannot bring the desired unity and development in any society. The paper recommends that it is the social and political attitude of Nigerians that will enhance its development. It further concludes that while steps are going on to evolve an indigenous national language, English should continue to serve as the official language.*

**Keywords:** *Communication, Development, Language, Multi-Lingualism, Uni-Lingualism.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Many linguists have attempted a definition. Others have simply seen it as an independable concept. Indeed, there cannot be an all-embracing definition of this concept. One or two definitions would give us a fair idea of what it really is. Awoniyi (1982) sees language as basic to all communication between one human being and another in the world over. Crystal (1971:239), defines language in terms of function as, the more frequently used and most highly developed form of human communication we possess. Hall (1986) sees language as, the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with one another by means of habitually used, auditory and arbitral symbols. It is clear that the above definitions play to see language as a tool per human communications. As a rule therefore, language is a medium of communication, derived by a specific group for the purpose of interaction and communication. On the whole, it suffices to say, that language is meant to communicate ideas, values and culture. Thus, the language of each group is an important determinant of the processes of integration, especially at the national level. Language as a means of communication is so central to the process of integration that members of different language groups do all things possible to ensure that their language is given prominence.

Language is seen as a nation's most important attribute to strengthen national unity. It makes planning easier as there would not be any duplication of efforts. A human society cannot exist without language because it is purely a human activity. Human beings use language to interact with one another not only as an instrument of communication but also as a means of individual expression. Language, therefore, is a system of communication between individuals in a society. It is thus connected with society through its functions. Language is the bedrock of social interaction and social harmony without which meaningful economic development and political stability cannot be achieved. The primacy of language in human affairs is indisputable. Being a supreme distinctive feature of man with its genesis in the divine and biological aspects, language must not be neglected in any human development programme. The notion of national development is geared to many interpretations and also subject to many criticisms. This study is used to embrace all the indicators of development, such as the role of growth per capita income, the degree of mass mobilisation and participation in political processes or the amount of differentiation and specialisation in occupational categories. It is also a multi dimensional process, the economic, political and communication infrastructures that are needed to provide the opportunity for each individual to realise his fullest potential.

According to Streeten (1972:30) development means transformation of human beings. Development as an objective and as a process both embraces change in fundamental attitudes to life and work and social, cultural and political institutions. The emphasis is on the recognition of man as the unit as well as the prosecutor of development. The acquisition of the peculiar habits of that community allows him to become a full member of the society. This is through contributing his responses to the common stock in such a manner that they would easily be recognised and stimulates response. Since national development entails co-operation between all the

units within a nation, language becomes the instrument without which any form of collaborative activity might be possible.

Related to the above is the role of language in communication, it gives direction to the growth of the society. This is the main strength of language as a resource in national development. Communication promotes the immediate and ultimate development plans of a nation via its system of collection and dissemination of information in support of government policies, laws, scientific and technological intelligence and course norms of social development.

## **II. The Concept of Language and Development**

The origin of human language is a problem from time immemorial. Men have for centuries been interested in the language they speak. What sets man apart from other animal is his ability to speak. We spend a large part of our lives speaking, writing and reading. Anthropologists regard language as a form of culturally transmitted behaviour. Sociologists regard it as an interaction between members of a social group. Students of literature see it as a means of artistic medium. Philosophers see it as a means of interpreting human experience while language teachers see it as a set of skills.

Sapir (1921:8) seems to capture it more precisely as a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. Language enables perfect communication between desperate social groups. It can be a powerful and essential means of human communication. Man came into existence as a result of spoken words-language. According to Bloch and Trager (1942:5) a language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates. What is striking about this definition in contrast with Sapir's, is that it makes appeal indirectly and by implication, to the communication function of language. It puts all its emphasis upon its social function. In doing so, it takes rather a narrow view of the role that language plays in society.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1960:7) sees language as the pattern in the speech of a community and the speaking activity of an individual in a particular situation. This definition does not tell us however, what these patterns are and what they are made up of and how. Gimson and Ramsaran (1970) see language as a system of conventional signals used for communication by a whole community. It also sees language as operating with two kinds of material sounds and ideas, social situations and meanings. Like de Saussure, he did not say how such conventional signal came about. Crying is a conventional signal, signalling joy and sorrow alike. However, crying is only an aspect of complementation.

According to the Encyclopaedia of Language and Linguistics (1994), language itself is a political concept. A language has been said, is dialect with an army or navy. The point of joke is that, what is commonly called language, "is a collocation of dialects and varieties. These dialects and varieties may be distinguished in terms of their geographical and social distribution. Language is also extended to the system of human communication other than speaking, writing or singing, as in phrases, such as "body language" and the "language of gesture". Computer scientists, logicians and mathematicians for strictly limited purposes, construct notional system which they call "language". And it is common in some quarter to refer to animal language. None of these systems would be described by linguists as "language" on the grounds that they do not possess the defining properties of human language. Development is synonymous with change. This promptly provokes the question "what kind of change? Since changes have been known to worsen the conditions of life of the people in society, development can be conceived either as a set of values or, when comparing the native levels of development of different countries. The values in question relate to conditions in society. There is no universal agreement about what these desired conditions should be. Individuals usually have difference regarding their life style and relationship with the rest of the society.

Development means something different to each one who speaks; it has no single meaning. Streeten (1972:15), sees the process of development in terms of progress in a number of interrelated dimensions. These are output and income, conditions of production, level of living (including nutrition, housing, health, and education) attitudes to work, institutions and policies. He also sees development as a multi-dimensional process or set of objectives in which the dimensions are economic, social, political and cultural. According to Rodney (1972:9) development is a multi-sided or many sided process. At the level of individual, it implies increased skills and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self discipline, responsibility and material well being. At the level of society, development presupposes the production capacity of the society and the level of productive force in that society. It also means the level at which society is organised to ensure the well being of the majority of the people of that society. Generally, Rodney, (1972) sees development as a fundamental change or transformation of the society in the manner which its production is capable of meeting the challenges of the majority of the people. Pye (1966:115), also views development as a multi-dimensional processes involving the organisational and re-orientation of the entire economic and social system. This includes improvement of income output. It also involves radical changes in institutional, social and administrative structures.

Development therefore, according to Pye (1966) is both in physical reality as well as in state of mind which the society has gone through.

Thus, the objectives of development are:

- i. To increase the availability and widen the distribution of basic life sustaining goods such as food, shelter, health and protection.
- ii. To raise the level of living including higher income, provision of more jobs, better education and greater attention to cultural and humanistic values.
- iii. To expand the range of economic and social choice to individuals and nations by pressing them from the bondage of servitude and dependence.

The results of about two decades of western oriented development planning in Nigeria have run counter to the operations and expectation of the planner. One important conclusion which emerges from the attempt to look at the concept of development is, as a prove, is synonymous with economic growth. Thus, we may agree with Streeten (1972:31), when he says that just as there can be economic growth with development, there can be development without economic growth.

### **III. The Problem of Language in National Development**

Language is beginning to occupy a more central position in national development planning. Even in developed countries, language problems are becoming increasingly urgent. Ethno linguistic pluralism has been at the base of Nigeria's political life since amalgamation in 1914. This is confirmed by the colonial policy, which demarcated the country along this ethno linguistic pluralism. This in part has helped to create political instability in Nigerian federation. It is because of this fact that National language started. This is not peculiar to developing countries alone. Tension between different social groups is often expressed through language because of its position as a symbol of group identity. The question that is of inherent to us is; must a valued nation be made up largely of one language group? In other words, is political separatism inherent in the existence of linguistic pluralism? Some instances of multi-lingual developed nations (e.g. Switzerland) and unilingual poorly developed nations, (e.g. Costa Rica) seem to suggest that there is no connection between 'uni-lingualism' and national development.

In Nigeria, the former western region was linguistically homogenous, but in spite of this, because of political and sectional factors, it was the least cohesive region in Nigerian federation. With these, we would tend to agree with Ayo Bamgbose that, "... multi-lingualism is not necessarily a barrier to national integration nor does uni-lingualism by itself ensure such integration. In either case, integration has to be fostered by orient political, cultural, educational and other measures. One cannot deny the fact that both conditions of multilingualism and uni-lingualism have advantages for national development and inter ethnic cohesiveness. However, we shall not attempt to catalogue such advantages or disadvantages. It has been posited that it is difficult to locate a country that is truly or genuinely monolingual. But the point is that, in any society, the centrifugal force which language exerts can be strong or weak, depending on two related situational factors, the level of economic and political development attained by the country in question and the degree in which social mobility is blocked because of membership in a given language group. In multi-lingual countries, it is not uncommon to see the intellectuals fanning the embers of hatred, may be in order to attract attention to gain support. Admittedly, there is no society without differences but what matter are not the differences, rather, the way they are handled. In the words of Fishman (1968: 45).

"..... differences do not need to be divisive. Divisiveness is an ideological position, and it can magnify minor differences: indeed it can manufacture differences in languages as in other matters most as early as it can capitalise on more obvious differences. Similarly, unification is an ideological position and it can minimise seemingly major differences or ignore them entirely ...."

Problem arises when some real or imagined differences are brought to the surface and connected into a hostile psychological attitude to some ethnic group. Subsequently, it is theoretically generalised as a policy of dissemination. In some countries, however, at a certain period of historical development, factors of a subjective order often come to the fore. Among such factors are ethnic biases and prejudices, ethnocentrism. This could lead to a conflict of situation, which is consequently generalised and reinforced. The situation prevailing in Nigeria is the hangover from the painful experience of colonial domination. The development process has been a long political and economic self-determination rather than cultural self-determinism. We ought to accept that others have faced similar problems but have in response, been able to create imaginative politics on which we would do well to draw from.

#### **IV. The Implication of a National Language on National Development**

One of the legacies of colonial rule in Africa and Nigeria in particular is the creation of many artificial states in which several ethnic groups have been brought together, under an administration within a single territory. The major pre-occupation therefore becomes how to ensure the continuity of “oneness” as well as the forging of a bond of belonging together as nationals of one nation. Perhaps, one of the most important symbols often involved in connection with this quest for national integration is a national language.

In Nigeria, the existence of about 400 languages, which would have a rich resource of consequences in our national development planning and implementation, has become a huge success of divisiveness in the polity. This situation arises essentially from the false association of language with ethnicity and the exploitation of the sentiment by the elites in order to gain political and economic advantage. Because of these, emphasis has shifted from attempts at evolving a national language to the consolidation of English as the official language of the country. That is, the language of government, law, education and commerce. However, a school of thought has pointed out that English is not organic to the people of this country. And that by making English the official language, the people are being forced to lose their creativity, naturalness and sense of belonging to be replaced by sense of limitation, artificiality and development of a split personality which breeds under development and dependency. They therefore contend that an organic language, which encapsulates the nature, thought processes and character of the people must be evolved and accepted as the national language.

But in a multi-lingual and developing nation like Nigeria, where seventy percent (70%) of the population is illiterate, where the elites are greedy and maliciously suspicious of each other, we cannot imagine an Hausa, Yoruba or Igbo man for instance, giving way to other persons language, to be adopted as the national language. So another school of thought taking advantage of such an existing situation, says that the language of wider communication which in this case refers to the English language and its pidgin derivative be used as the official and not national language because of its tendency to de-emphasize ethnic and allied divisions in the people. The specific language or languages to be adopted as the country's official language, national language or both, becomes the question for sociolinguists. These factors include population, acceptability, vertical integration, language development, status and nationalism versus nationism. The logic of vertical integration points to the adoption of one more indigenous language.

While these facilities communicate and make governing possible, it limits participation to a fortunate few and excludes the masses that cannot participate because the language of government is not available to them. Using the criteria of language development status, sociolinguists' works ascertain the literacy tradition of the language being considered. They will look at its stage of development in terms of such indices as used for normal existing processes, publication of research in the sciences, translation of scientific work and level of standardisation.

Alternatively, sociolinguists may emphasize a language with national and international status used as a school subject or medium of instruction, literacy and religious instruction and in mass media including newspaper, magazine, radio and television. In determining the choice of a national language, using a population, sociolinguistic researches and success in other nations have shown that population is usually an important factor.

This factor presents two possible models, the majority model by which the choice is based on the language of the majority of the population, and the minority model, by which the choice is based on the language of a minority of the population. It is sometimes suggested that the minority model is better because it picks most of the population at an equal disadvantage.

This notwithstanding, sociolinguists are of the opinion that a language spoken by ten million people has a better chance of being adopted as a national language than one spoken by one million people. It does not follow that only countries, that are linguistically homogenous or monolingual countries of Northern Arabs, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi and so on have a low and very low per capita Gross National Product (GNP). Clearly then, this evidence suggests that there must be other variables at work in national development process other than language alone. However, just as we have no doubt about the fact that language is a great resource of consequence in national development effort, we contend that language diversity slows down economic development. We also believe that a linguistically homogenous society is a breeding ground for suspicious sectionalism, ethnicism and the isolation of the minorities.

Furthermore, because of the general fear that a definite language policy will generate inter-ethnic unrest among the general populace, the various governments of Nigeria from 1960 till date have failed to accord language the importance it deserves in national language question. We suggest that efforts be totally geared towards completely standardizing and “Nigerianizing” the English language in such a manner that, it would assume a wholly Nigerian sensibility and character. This can be embarked upon by using the English language as we have it within Nigeria today as the superstructure upon which “Nigerianism” like “Americanism” will become the reference to English that is decidedly Nigerian.

## **V. Conclusion**

There is no denying the fact that language promotes loyalty and internal cohesion. It also serves as a rallying point for the process of nation building. Language encapsulates all areas of development. But language alone cannot bring the desired unity and development in any society. The deliberate use of language as an instrument for forging national unity in a multi-lingual country may lead to conflict and disunity. The attempts of Hindu India and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, where efforts to unify through common language led to riots, are reminders of what could happen in any multi-lingual situation. Our underdevelopment does not lie in our multi-linguistic nature rather it lies within our social and political attitudes; for no nation is united by virtue of sameness of language alone.

## **VI. Recommendations**

The writer is indeed appreciative of the steps that have long been taken by various governments in the country and the contribution of some eminent scholars, organisations and agencies, towards resolving the language issue. Despite these, the government is urged to appreciate that although language planning does not yield immediate tangible returns like economic and political programmes, it nevertheless, has a more pervasive, more underlying, more permanent impact on the polity at large. And as such, any well expanded investment in language planning will eventually bear fruit in the over all human development of Nigerian as a nation.

Government should appreciate that fundamental role of language in human development plans generally tends to emphasize economic and political dimensions at the expense of language which in more underlying cultural value of our national life, does not go down well for the development of the country. Meanwhile, the adoption of a foreign language as our national language is not justified. On the other hand, an immediate decision on an indigenous language is not a feasible proposition, partly because there may not be an obvious choice and partly because of the contentious nature of such a decision. However, if there is any need to choose an indigenous language, considerable work needs to be done to develop the language and necessary steps taken to spread it. In view of this, a long-term has to be taken of the matter. While steps are going on to evolve an indigenous national language, namely Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba, the foreign language, English currently serving as the official language should continue to serve that role.

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