The Linguistic Culture of African Union: Implications to Regional Unity, Identity and Development

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Abstract

The major objective of African Union is to have a united and strong Africa. This objective manifests in their anthem. One of the major media of unification, identification and development amongst a group of peoples is culture which embodies language. This paper attempts to investigate the linguistic culture of African Union (AU) and to find out whether language and culture go a long way in fostering unity, identity and development among member states of AU. The data were collected from the AU deliberations which were applied to the present day situation of AU. The finding show that the AU is still under linguistic imperialism; that the African identity

has eluded AU and that the quest for African development is still a mirage. The suggestion then, is that AU should go back to the drawing board and be linguistically liberated and independent so as to foster real unity, to have real identity which will ignite reasonable technological, scientific and manpower development.

Introduction

Language is a universal phenomenon. As such, it is one of the major characteristics of man irrespective of the geographical location, racial identity or religious inclination. Language all over the globe performs the same functions and has the same characteristics. This is why it is said that no language is superior to the other. Despite the myth about the origin of proliferation of languages, there is still compatibility of global communication through language. The multifarious and multilingual nature of the globe is never a hindrance to global communication. "Necessity they say is the mother of invention". The problem of multiplicity of languages of the globe is solved through the presence of polyglots, interpreters and interpreting machines. Language all over the globe exhibits the same characteristics. The characteristics are mainly on the functions they perform. The issues of language are global because all the languages are said to be equal, and no language is superior to the other.

The paper is presented in sections; the first section discusses the concept of language, the second section examines the objectives of the African Union, the linguistic culture of African Union is on the third section, while the language universal among AU members, and language and development in AU are discussed in the fourth and fifth sections respectively, section six focusses on the implications of the linguistic culture of AU to regional unity, identity and development, then, the suggestions to have universal languages in AU and the conclusion.

Concept of Language

Whatever people do when they come together- whether they play, fight, make love, or make automobiles- they talk. Man lives in a world of language. People talk face-to-face and over the telephone, and everyone responds with more talk. Television and radio further swell this torrent of words. The possession of language, perhaps more than any other attributes, distinguishes human from other animals. Philosophy says that language is the source of human life and power (Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams, 2003). One can then say that language is organised sounds that come out of man's mouth when organs of speech come in contact with one another in the appropriate matter. This shows that it is not all sounds which come out of man's mouth can be regarded as language. Sounds like hissing, belching, signing, coughing, etc. are not language. Whenever people talk about themselves or circumstances, or ask for information about others and circumstances, they are using language in order to exchange facts and

opinion. The use of language is often called 'referential', 'propositional', or 'ideational'. Language is studied because of its unique role in capturing the breadth of human thought and endeavour. All above the human communities are varieties of thousands of languages expressing multiplicity of world views, literatures and ways of life.

One of the commonest uses of language is for emotional expression. This means getting rid of one's nervous energy when under stress. Emotive language can be used when or not one is alone. Swear words and obscenities are probably the commonest signals that one is in angry or frustrated state. Language in most cases is used to maintain comfortable relationship between people. Its sole function is to provide a means of avoiding a situation where both parties might find themselves embarrassing. Similarly, the use of such expressions like, 'hello', 'good morning' or 'please to meet you' are ritual exchanges of pleasantries, do not communicate ideas in the usual sense. Sentences of this kind are usually automatically produced, and stereotyped in structure. In a situation like this, language is used for the purpose of maintaining rapport among language users. This is known as 'phatic communion'.

Language is used to record facts. This function of language is represented by kinds of record-keeping, such as historical records, geographical survey, and scientific reports, among others. It is an essential domain of language, for the availability of these materials guarantees the knowledge-base of subsequent generations, which is a prerequisite of social development. Language tells listener or reader a great deal about the speaker or writer. Language passes information about the regional origin, social background, and level of education, occupation, age, sex, and personality of the speaker/ writer (Crystal, 1987).

The African Union which has about 54 member nations uses language in their day to day deliberation despite the fact that the organisation is multilingual because no two nations in the Union have the same language. The matter is even more crucial because within a member nation are prolific indigenous languages.

The Objectives of African Union

The motto of AU is 'a united and strong Africa'. The anthem is 'let us all unite and celebrate together'. The official languages are: Arabic, English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Swahili, and any other African language. It is made up of fifty-four membership states. OAU charter was established on 25th May, 1963. The following are the objectives of the AU:

- To achieve greater unity and solidarity between the African countries and the people of Africa;

- To defend the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of its member states;

- To accelerate the political and socio-economic integration of the continent;

- To promote and defend African common positions on issues of interest to the continent and its peoples;

- To encourage international cooperation, taking due account of the charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;

- To promote peace, security, and stability on the continent;

- To promote democratic principles and institutions, popular participation and good governance;

- To promote and protect human and peoples' rights in accordance with the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and other relevant human rights instruments;

- To establish the necessary conditions which enable the continent to play its rightful role in the global economy and in international negotiations;

- To promote sustainable and development at the economic, social and cultural levels as well as the integration of African economies;

- To promote co-operation in all fields of human activity to raise the standards of African peoples;

- To coordinate and harmonize the policies between the existing and future Regional Economic Communities for the gradual attainment of the objectives of the union;

- To advance the development of the continent by promoting research in all fields, in particular in science and technology;

- To work with relevant international partners in the eradication of preventable diseases and the promotion of good health on the continent (Chumbow, 2009).

Life in the African Union are: citizenship, culture, demographics, economy, education, enlargement, foreign relations, geography, history, languages, military, politics, sports and statistics.

The AU has adopted a number of important new documents establishing norms at continental level, to supplement those already in force when it was created. These include the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption (2003), the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2007), the New

Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and its associated Declaration on Democracy, Political, Economic and Corporate Governance.

The AU has a number of official bodied such as Executive Council composed of ministers designated by the governances of member states. It decides on matters such as foreign trade, social security, food, agriculture and communications also Specialised Technical Committee, which has ten proposed themes such as: Rural economy and Agricultural Matters; Monetary and Financial affairs; Trade, Customs and Immigration; Industry, Science and Technology; Energy, Natural Resources, and Environment; Transport, and Communications and Tourism; Health; Labour, and Social Affairs; Education, Culture, and Human Resources (Chum bow, 2009).

The official bodies were inaugurated so as to help in fostering unity and development among the AU members. As a signal that AU wants unity and identity among member states it eventually aims to have a single currency (the Afro). The AU faces many challenges, including health issues such as combating malaria and the AIDS/HIV epidemic; political issues such as confronting undemocratic regimes and mediating in the many civil wars; economic issues such as improving the standard of living of millions of impoverished, uneducated Africans; ecological sustainability; as well as the legal issues regarding Western Sahara. Then, how about universal language issue?

The AU's future goals include the creation of a free trade area, a customs union, a single market, a central bank, and a common currency, thereby establishing economic and monetary union. The current plan is to establish an African Economic Community with a single currency by 2023.

Language of the African Union

AU operates in a multilingual outfit, all of which are languages of the colonial masters. According to the Constitution Act of the African Union, its working languages are Arabic, English, French, Portuguese and African languages "if possible". A protocol amending the Constitutive Act, adopted in 2003 but as at 2007 not yet in force, added Spanish, Swahili and "any other African language" and termed all the six "official" (rather than "working") languages of the African Union. In practice, translation of documents of the AU into the four current working languages which used to cause significant delays and difficulties to the conduct of business, has known a great leap forward since late 2007, when modern translation tools and working methods were introduced. Founded in 2001 under the auspices of the AU, the African Academy of languages promotes the usage and perpetuation of African languages among African people. The AU declared 2006 the year of African languages.

Symbols- The emblem of the African Union consists of a gold ribbon bearing small interlocking red rings, from which palm leaves shoot up around an outer gold

circle and an inner green circle, within which is a gold representation of Africa. The red interlinked rings stand for African solidarity and the blood shed for the liberation of Africa; palm leaves for peace; gold for Africa's wealth and bright future; green for African hopes and aspirations. To symbolize African Unity, the silhouette of Africa is drawn without internal borders. The flag is now part of the paraphernalia of the African Union and replaces the old one. The flag has led to the creation of the "national colours" of Africa of gold and green. The African Union has adopted a new anthem, *Let us all unite and celebrate together,* and has the chorus, *O sons and daughters of Africa, flesh of the sun and flesh of the sky, Let us make Africa the tree of life* (Chumbow, 2009).

Language Universal among the AU Members

There is universality of languages because all languages exhibit the same features. Firstly, language belongs to everyone. No part of society or social behaviour is exempted. All languages have complex grammar. Simplicity and regularity are usually thought to be desirable features of language; but no natural language is simple or wholly regular. All languages have intricate grammatical rules and all have exceptions to those rules. For instance, in the Igbo language, the principle of vowel harmony is violated by some words like people's names, dialectal words, Igbonised words, etc.

Similarly, there is no evidence that some languages are in the long term 'easier for children to learn' than others, though in the short term some linguistic features may be learned at different rates by the children of speakers of different languages. Every child no matter the tribe, the colour must undergo the same stages of language development, ranging from babbling stage, holophrastic stage, phonological development, morphological development, syntactic and semantic developments, (see Obiora, and Anedo, 2008). All languages are equal because they all have the same characteristics and perform the same functions. A belief that some languages are superior to others is widespread, but it has no basis in linguistic fact. Some languages are of course more useful or prestigious than others at a given period of history due to preeminence of the speakers at that time, and not due to any inherent linguistic characteristics. The view of the modern linguistics is that a language should not be valued on the basis of political or economic influence of its speakers. If it were otherwise, one would have rated the Spanish and Portuguese spoken in the 16th Century as better than they are today. Also, modern American English would be better than British English. When one makes such a comparison, only a small range of linguistic differences is discovered, and nothing to warrant such sweeping conclusion (Crystal, 1987).

Families of Language

There is no agreed total number of languages of the world. Reasons for this are that even today new people, and therefore, languages continue to be discovered in the unexplored regions of the world especially in the Amazon basin, Central Africa and New Guinea. There are in fact many countries where linguistic surveys are incomplete or have not even begun. The first scientific attempts to discover the history of the world's languages were made at the end of the 18th century. Scholars compare groups of languages in systematic and detailed way to see whether there were correspondences between them. If this could be demonstrated it could be assumed that the languages were related. In order words, that they developed from a common source even though this might no longer exist. Evidence of common origin of groups of languages was readily available in Europe, French, Spanish, Italian, and other Romance languages were clearly descended from Latin.

Languages of the world can be classified through the genetic or the typological method of linguistic classification. Genetic classification is a historical classification based on the assumption that languages have diverged from a common ancestor. It uses early written remains evidence. Typological classification is based on a comparison of the formal similarities which exist between languages. It is an attempt to group languages into structural types, on the basis of phonological, grammar, or vocabulary, rather than in terms of any real or assumed historical relationship. One obvious fact is that both the genetic and typological classification ignore the relevance of cultural links between languages, the fact that languages influence one another by contact, such as by borrowing words from one another.

In Africa, the languages outnumbered other languages of the world. Chumbow (2009:26) reports that, "Africa is the most linguistically diversified continent with more than 2086 languages of over 6600 languages of the world. All African countries are multilingual in varying degrees; from three languages in Rwanda and Burundi to over 450 in Nigeria." The numerical strength of the languages is uncertain because many areas are inaccessible. As a result Africa is a continent of lingua francas. Arabic is used throughout the North and North-East. Swahili is spoken in most parts of East-Africa; English and French are wide spread, often as official languages in their former territories.

African languages are grouped into Niger-Congo which include: Benue-Congo, Adamawa Eastern group, Kwa group where Igbo, Yoruba, Ijaw, Ewe belong, voltaic group, West Atlantic group, and Mande group. Other groups are Nilo-Saharan, Afro-Asiantic language and Chadic language where Hausa language belongs (Crystal, 1987).

Language and Development in AU

From the linguistic perspective, the single most important characteristics of African nations is linguistic diversity. All African countries are indeed, multilingual and multicultural in varying degrees. This fact establishes the existence of a multiplicity of ethno-linguistic communities within each nation-state. Each linguistic community is in turn characterized by an autonomous ethno-linguistic identity. On the most heralded paradigm of development in the current state of African nationalism is predicated on the ideal of pluralism as an ideological foundation of nationhood in Africa. In the quest for national development in Africa, how are the facts of linguistic diversity and the existence of ethno-linguistic identities be reconciled with the exigencies of pluralism? Put simply, how do emergent African nations achieve unity in diversity? (Chumbow, 2009). The relative achievements of African nations since independence in relation to the contrasting evidence of extensive abject mass rural poverty, is best described as growth without achievement. The sorry state of affairs is due, in part at least, to the fact that language factor in development has not been fully and comprehensively addressed or has been addressed only haphazardly and half-heartedly. It has been argued forcefully that the economic and social development of Africa depends crucially on the development and use of African languages in the enterprise of national development. Thus, Chumbow (2005:168) in Chombow (2009) articulates this issue in the following terms: An evaluation of the efforts of African countries in the enterprise of national development shows that in most cases, there has been what we may call growth without development because despite visible signs of economic progress (along with considerable population explosion), African countries are characterized by a massive presence of abject poverty in the rural communities (villages) and the outskirts of urban areas (where most city dwellers live) surrounding a few affluent villas capped by token sky-scrapers in the city centres. The target of development should be the improvement of the welfare and social well-being of the entire citizenry.

The medium of education in most of Africa is still largely via an exoglossic or foreign language of colonial heritage such as English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, etc., with the consequence that only an estimated 20 to 40 percent of the African population is educated in these languages. The fact that the sum total of the knowledge, technology, skills and techniques relevant to and required for national development are confined to and transmitted in a foreign language used by a relatively small fraction of the population means that the majority (60 to 80 percent) who do not speak the official language are literally marginalized and excluded from the development equation. This has led to the widely held position of language experts over the years (since UNESCO 1953) adopted by the Organisation of African Union (OAU 1986) and consolidated by the African Union (AU 2006a, AU 2006b, AU 2006c) that there is a need to develop and use African language in education, public administration (governance) and other

areas of development along with English, French, Portuguese, etc., the official languages, as partner languages. The effective mobilization of the masses of the rural population for national development so that they can become trained, skilled, knowledgeable and effective agents of change in the national development enterprise requires the democratization of access to knowledge not in a foreign language but in a language or languages the people know best: an African language. Language and culture are intimately related because language is a vector or carrier of culture. Language is the means by which people who belong to a common community, express their belonging to that community. The loss of one's language means a loss of part of the national cultural treasure and a total loss of one's natural identity.

Implications of the Linguistic Culture of AU to Regional Unity, Identity and Development and Suggested Ways out of the Hook

It has been observed that there is an impediment to the unity, identity and development among member nations of AU. The shortfall can be traced to the non-existence of a uniformed or a universal language in AU. As mentioned earlier that there are new documents establishing norms at continental levels, the researcher is suggesting that it will augur well for AU if the new documents be written or translated into African languages, also, that the norms should include developing a universal language for AU.

It was also said that the membership into AU are all independent countries of Africa and African waters. The "independent" meant here, is it only political independent? What about linguistic independent? The OAU/AU charter was established on 25th May, 1963, that was fifty years ago. One might ask, 'How far has AU gone with total liberation? Total independence must start with the recognizing of one's identity. A community which cannot or rather which is not proud of its identity is heading to its graveyard which is extinction. One is identified with his culture and language. But this identity is far from reality among AU members. They are comfortable to have their deliberations in alien languages. None of the languages of their business is an African language. This is not a good score for a third largest continent of the world.

The life in the AU includes culture, history, and language, among others. How can an independent community record her history with the language of her imperialists? Culture and language have physical manifestation and not implied. Culture and language are to be expressed without any fear or prejudice. Some official bodies of AU (like Executive Council, Economic, Social and Cultural Council, Specialized Technical Council) are entrusted with the task of communication. These bodies should make sure that communication in the business of the union is done in indigenous African languages.

AU has a national flag and aims to have a single currency. If AU can do this, why can't it have a universal language? This universal language (is suggested) to be inform of an artificial language or any indigenous African language which Africans can learn at the grassroots. The barrier of multiplicity of languages can also be tackled through this. With one language, African Union can speak with one voice, which is unity in diversity. They can proudly identify themselves as real Africa and come out totally from the yoke of imperialism because slaves speak the language of their masters. If truly we are independent we have to be independent linguistically. In doing so we can forge ahead and think about technological and scientific development.

Suggestions to have Universal Languages in AU

There is no gain saying that language poses an obstacle to communication in AU meetings. The fact still remains that lack of a common language can severely be an impediment to the deliberations of member nations. 'Necessity they say is a mother of invention'. This language barrier is not an end in itself; there are several efforts to avert the language barrier. Some of the attempts are:

- Increase the number and availability of translating and interpreting services.
- Develop an auxiliary language that everyone will understand
- Develop an existing language as a continental language that everyone will understand
- Building a Term bank
- Formation of International Phonetic Association (IPA)

When people are faced with a language barrier, one of the ways out of the hook is to find an **interpreter** or a **translator.** The term 'translation' is the neutral term used for all tasks where the meaning of expressions in one language (the 'source' language) is turned into the meaning of another (the 'target' language).

Another solution to the language barrier among AU nations is the continental unification of terminologies otherwise known as '**term bank'.** Several efforts have been made to organize data bank of terminologies in various fields (such as medicine, technology, science, etc.) using computational techniques of information storage and retrieval. For instance, the E.E.C. term bank is now publicly accessible on-line via Euronet and contains over 180,000 items in the official languages of the community.

Machine translation is another device for globalizing the languages of Africa. The idea of using machine to provide translation between natural languages has been in existence since 1930s. The rise of information theory, the success of advanced code-breaking techniques, and the invention of the electronic computer all indicate that machine translation (MT) is reality. For instance, some GSM handsets (nokia brand) are configured in different languages of the world including Nigeria languages like Igbo. The same can be done for African languages.

Another suggestion to the unification of Africa languages is the development of an **'artificial language'** (AL). It is a language which has been specially invented to facilitate international communication. The artificial language must be easy to learn, meaning that the grammar must be simple and regular when compared to that of the natural language. The semantic formation has to be based on clear principles and there should be no difficult sounds. The artificial language should have no dialectal variation in order to avoid the risk of mutual intelligibility. An authoritative body should monitor all proposals for new forms. That is to say that the artifical language must be standardized. This type of language should be introduced in schools early enough so that the younger ones who are the leaders of tomorrow can master it in their tender age. Cultural pluralism is an ideology which seeks to maintain and develop each linguistic and cultural heritage within the nation-state is also suggested by the researcher. Such an ideology naturally favours linguistic diversity, multilingualism and the pluralism of cultures.

The languages of a nation are its natural resources on the same level as its cocoa, coffee, gold, diamond or petroleum. Like all natural resources, they have to be exploited (planned, developed) and used for national development. However, if care is not taken to plan, multilingualism like its twin, multi-ethnicity, may become a source of tension and conflict within the nation-state (Chumbow, 1987).

Conclusion

Despite the fact that Africa continent is characterized by language diversity, language universal is still possible for the member states of African Union. The continent, Africa, can be a global village linguistically because language experts, interpreters, translators and language machines are to be charged to work relentlessly to avert the language barriers by decoding whatever is encoded in other languages of Africa. Better still, an artificial language or a universal language can be developed for Africa. With this, the AU can achieve most of its objectives; to foster unity among members, it can have real identity, and development can be achieved in all spheres of live.

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