

## **Language as a Tool for Unification and Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Language is of great essence to man. It is the means through which humans express their thoughts, exchange phatic communion, develop themselves and conquer their environments. Nigeria is one multilingual country in which the role of language as a unifying factor cannot be denied. Every citizen of Nigeria belongs to a particular ethno-linguistic family by means of which social relationships and affinities are shared among people of the same sociocultural and sociolinguistic lineage. The current spate of violent extremism in parts of the country has led to debates on the unity and socio-economic development of the country which cannot thrive in the face of uncertainties and violent upheavals. Thus, this paper discussed the role of language in the unification and socio-economic development in Nigeria. Ideas and opinions were obtained from secondary sources and analysed qualitatively. As a way forward, the paper recommended the adoption of the Hausa language for the purposes of unification and socio-economic development in Nigeria.

*Keywords:* language, unification, socio-economic development, culture

### **1. Introduction**

Many proposals have been made on the issue of an indigenous national language in Nigeria to accelerate national unity and socio-economic development. With over 400 tribes and languages in Nigeria (Nwala & Obisike, 2014; Ndukwe, 2015), it is evidently impossible to satisfy all the demands of every ethno-linguistic group in the quest for an indigenous national language (Mann, 1990). The proposals failed because of difficulty in their implementation due to inherent setbacks and handicaps. For example, it was suggested that the three major languages should be learnt simultaneously, and that was the principle behind WAZOBIA (a combination of the major languages in Nigeria: Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo) which failed because ethnic sentiments beclouded its conception. It has now become very clear that adopting the three major languages simultaneously in whichever disguise may be cumbersome in execution. Again, WAZOBIA gives the impression of reconfiguration of the country into three regions as represented by the three languages, thereby defeating the purpose of unification of Nigeria. Others include Swahili, Esperanto and Guosa, Anglo-Nigerian Pidgin (Mann, 1990). Arguments for an indigenous national language have continued to attract attention among academics because of its effect on socio-economic development.

Socio-economic development, as a term, focuses on the improvement of the overall life of individuals in terms of their access to basic things of life such as food, house, clothing, education, good health and security. Socio-economic development also translates into reduction of inequalities and illiteracies (including political and moral illiteracies). It is the process of transformation in gross domestic product, life expectancy, literacy and levels of employment (Kapur, 2018). As noted by Olaide and Abdulkareem (2021), socio-economic development is a broad term which encompasses all essential areas of life that need development. The level of socio-economic development in Nigeria has been captured by

National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2020). According to NBS, over 82.9 million Nigerians were considered poor based on the Nigeria Living Standards Survey (NLSS) of 2018 -19. The NLSS is predicated on the consumption aggregate of a household on food and non-food goods and services. The report of “2019 poverty and inequality in Nigeria” indicates that 40% of the total population, that is, 83 million people live below the country’s poverty line of 137,430 Naira (\$381.75) per year, a substantiation of the claim that Nigeria is the world capital of poverty. The NLSS underscores the need for socio-economic development in Nigeria.

Many factors contribute to the socio-economic development of a country, depending on the political, social, environmental, religious, cultural, educational and linguistic backgrounds of the country. Again, most of the factors elapse into each other; hence a political factor has both social and cultural undertones. This paper focuses on language as an important tool for unification and socio-economic development in Nigeria. It derives its concern from the dwindling state of nationhood orchestrated by violent extremism in parts of the country and agitations for secession. The paper is also mindful of the fact that development cannot take place where divisive tendencies appear overwhelming hence an attempt is made here to establish the link between language and unity, which is the bedrock for development. Based on this understanding, this paper lends itself to the position of Jhingan (2011):

For development, it is essential that races should not be kept aloof from each other. Rather, they should be intermixed so that there is a union of cultural values and racial qualities. But such measures require a lot of patience. The society’s structure is transformed by such racial changes (p. 63).

Jhingan’s exposition serves as a launching pad for the discourse here. This objective shall be accomplished through the following subheadings:

- Concept of Language
- Language as a tool for Unification
- Language as a tool for Cultural Exchange
- Language as a tool for Internal Business transactions
- Language as a tool for Security of a Nation

## **2. Concept of Language**

Language, loosely and generally known as a means of communication, is of great essence to man. It is the means through which humans express their thoughts, exchange phatic communion, develop themselves and conquer their environments. Language may be expressed verbally or nonverbally as in the case of the deaf and dumb who depend on sign language for communication. That ants and animals gather, disperse and run away when they sense a danger is an indication that their existence is dependent on a language which enables them to communicate. It is obvious that humans cannot exist and co-exist without a form of communication. This explains why it is difficult for any human to exist without both auditory and visual organs.

The foregoing explanation of language drives impetus from the following definitions of language as:

1. any particular system of human communication which consists of the structured arrangement of sounds (or their written representation) into larger units, e.g. morphemes, words, sentences, utterances (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p.311).
2. any verbal or non-verbal communication engaged in by humans, animals, or even machines ( Scott & Gordon, 2005, p. 353).

3. a system of communication by vocal sounds within a group of people who use it to convey meaning (Tamunobelega, 2015, p. 417).

Specifically, the exploration and fullest use of language as a means of communication puts humans apart; hence in the words of Emenanjo (2015, p. 277): “language is one of the things that distinguish man from other animals. ... It shares all the dynamic characteristics of all living things, including death”. The implication of this discourse is that language is human specific. According to Nwala and Obisike (2014), humans use language to transmit their cultures and exchange all forms of phatic communion. This means that language can be harnessed for socio-economic development of a country especially in a multilingual nation like Nigeria. It is in this regard that one sees the imperativeness of the adoption of English Language as the official language of Nigeria. No one can dispute the fact that using English as a medium of communication and pedagogy over the years has facilitated its spread in Nigeria, unifying the various language groups (Nwala & Obisike, 2014). Logically, if English, a hitherto foreign language, can unite Nigerians, the adoption of an indigenous language, without ethnic bias, will further unite the country.

### **3. Language as a Tool for Unification**

Language is the nucleus of every society as it unites and also destroys an organization. The unifying power of language is explicitly stated in the Bible (Genesis 11:6): “Now then, these are all one people and they speak one language; this is just the beginning of what they are going to do. Soon they will be able to do anything they want”. The importance of language has been enunciated by the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) in her *National Policy on Education*:

Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion; and preserving cultures. Thus every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment. Furthermore, in the interest of national unity it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (p. 10).

The above position of government has given credence to the thrust of this discourse. Collaboratively, Ndukwe (2015) agrees that language promotes loyalty and internal cohesion, connecting a rallying point for the process of national development. Consequently, it has become necessary for Nigeria to adopt one indigenous language as the second official language in Nigeria, replacing the position of French. This arrangement will unite the part of Nigeria that owns the language and other parts of the country, leading to what Nair (2018) calls national unity. According to Nair, a national language helps to foster national unity.

### **4. Language as a Tool for Cultural Exchange**

The culture of a people is transmitted through the use of language. Every language carries with it the behaviour and artifacts of its owners. It means that language and culture are inseparable (Kuo & Lai, 2006); as one is learning a language, one is also learning the culture of its owners. In the case of Nigeria, it has been noticed that code-switching to an indigenous language is a mark of solidarity and love for the owners of the language, bridging cultural gaps in society.

Yu (2020) also avers that language and culture are so symbiotically related that one’s attitude towards the target culture can affect the understanding of the second language. This means that if one has a positive attitude towards a given tribe’s culture, one’s love for the tribe’s language will be expressive. So, positive cross-cultural psychology can be developed

among Nigerians with the view to creating better world views and dispositions towards one another. It is therefore pertinent here to re-emphasise the need for a national language in Nigeria because of its potentials to create national cohesion and tolerance.

#### **5. Language as a Tool for Internal Business transactions**

In Nigeria, English has gained ground as the language used in markets, in day-to-day business transactions given the heterogeneous nature of the nation (Nwala & Obisike, 2014). One cannot also deny the fact many Nigerians who are illiterate in English struggle to communicate effectively during exchange of goods and services with non-speakers of their local language. The local traders who dominate “bush markets” in Nigeria readily come to mind here. Adoption of an indigenous national language will solve the problem of language of business for that part of the country that owns the national language. This will create large markets for goods and services in Nigeria.

#### **6. Language as a Tool for Security of the Nation**

Ethno-linguistic pluralism is one of the factors responsible for increase in banditry and insecurity. The simple reason that, psychologically, an individual would be suspicious and conscious of the presence of another person, if possible, prepare for attack so long as they have difficulty in communication. This psychology permeates all areas of life, including places of work, marriages and most importantly, security formations. This explains why Liddicoat (2008) avers that for armed forces to succeed in their operations, they need a common language; in this case, an indigenous language that can foster unity and brotherhood. To achieve this objective, an indigenous national language should be adopted and taught in military and police colleges. By acquiring the language, they would perform optimally in the zone where the language has its native speakers.

#### **7. Conclusion**

Nigeria is one multilingual country in which the role of language as a unifying factor cannot be denied. Every citizen of Nigeria belongs to a particular ethno-linguistic family by means of which social relationships and affinities are shared among people of the same sociocultural and sociolinguistic lineage. For example, a Hausa trader residing in the southern part of Nigeria will show brotherly bargaining with any customer (from any southern tribe) who speaks Hausa. There are instances where many Nigerians gained one favour or the other because of their ability to speak a particular language in certain situations. Ultimately, language has the power of bridging the gap of ethnic divides in a multi-tribal nation, leading to peaceful co-existence. It is also capable of stimulating socio-economic growth by first creating a peaceful environment as no meaningful development can thrive in disunity.

#### **8. The Way Forward**

To achieve the same feat which the English language has recorded in Nigeria as her language of unification, one indigenous language should be adopted, taught in schools nationwide for quick spread. This arrangement will unite the part of the country that owns the language with the rest parts. The fear that the adoption will make other languages extinct has no basis. After all, the indigenous languages have, over the years, been functioning alongside the use of English as the official language in Nigeria without going into extinction. This paper suggests the adoption of the Hausa language for this purpose. The reasons for the choice of Hausa are:

1. The southern part of Nigeria is more receptive to education; hence it will be easier to have Hausa taught in the schools in the South.

2. The Hausa language has the capacity of bridging the gap between the north and the south because of its commercial value; many of the food items used in Nigeria come from the north.
3. It will give security agencies the confidence to fight insurgency in the north as they speak and interact in Hausa.
4. There are more untapped economic potentials in the north waiting to be harnessed. Many southerners are reluctant to move to the north because of insecurity arising from language differences.

In addition, Mann (1990, p.98) wrote: "...Hausa is generally regarded as an easy language to learn. Of all the major languages of Nigeria, Hausa is the only one to enjoy this reputation."

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