

A NATIONAL LANGUAGE AS A VEHICLE FOR NATIONAL RECONSTRUCTION

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Abstract

One of Nigeria's failures as an independent state is her inability to evolve a national language. A nation without a national language, selected from one of her indigenous languages, is a nation without philosophy, culture and national unity and oneness. A nation should have a common medium of expression by which the government and the governed could use for effective communication; politically, socially, economically and otherwise. Nation building, rebirth or reconstruction is meaningless if there is absence of a national language. A situation where the country has English as our official language, and gambles with three indigenous languages as national languages is a disgrace to nationhood. It is retrogression to our national reconstruction and rebirth. Undoubtedly, a national language remains the only vehicle for our social and economic reconstruction. This is what this paper is set to prove.

Introduction

Language remains an indispensable instrument needed by man to facilitate his daily interaction with his fellows whether socially or economically. Language is seen as a means of expressing societal tradition and culture. For a group of people to be called a nation in the true sense of it, it should possess a unifying culture, ethnic identity, historical and linguistic affinity. All these ingredients are expressed through the language. Language and culture are intricately interwoven, interrelated and dovetailed. The death of one is the death of the other. A nation's cultural attitude is reflected in its speech patterns.

UNESCO (1953) stated that man is always himself, and at the same time, the cause, transmitter and recipient of culture. His mother tongue reflects his culture and personality as well as the group to which he belongs. Awoniyi (1982) had maintained that education is meant to be embedded in the society that establishes it. Whether formal or informal, education should be transmitted from generation to generation through the vehicle of communication known to the people, the mother tongue. If mother-tongue education is to be made meaningful, it has to go through the context of formal and informal education. The mother tongue is the vehicle through which the child opens the door that unravel all that are shrouded in nature and living, Awoniyi insisted. The use of any language other than the child's mother tongue limits his expression of reality. It is therefore essential, in a multilingual community like Nigeria, with English as the main language of education, to make some allowances for our indigenous languages, in, at least the first six years of the educational process, to serve as the vehicle for these contents of formal education. Adekunle (1976) regretted that non-integration of these indigenous languages or groups into a national language, remains one of the major problems of young multi-ethnic nations (especially Nigeria).

Nigeria needs a national language, because a national language remains a potent factor for achieving national integration; leading to social and economic reconstruction. A national language of internal communication should be linked to the developing of national goals, national symbols, national rituals and national identifications that a nation needs for uniting its people. The least that a national language policy should target at is to make all the citizenry to be literate in that country's national language. A national language must be widely acceptable to all, and it must cut across the entire strata of society. A national language cuts across ethnic boundaries. A national language is seen as a symbol of oneness and unity. Akindele and Adegbite (1992) made it clear that a national language, by all intents and purposes, is a language which has the authority of the government conferred on it as the language of a number of ethnic groups in a given geo-socio-political area.

But it is very unfortunate to observe that the Nigerian government has not accorded any of our indigenous languages any recognition as a national language. English language is being used as our official language; while Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba languages are regarded as three 'major' Nigerian languages, and not '*national*' languages. The implication is that Nigeria has no national language, forty-three years after Independence. This is the bane of our '*go-slow*' posture in making progress as a

nation. The march to social and economic reconstruction has slowed down considerably because of different philosophies, different cultures, different symbols and different rituals, being expressed in different Tongues.

Language Problem in Nigeria

Nigeria inherited English as the official language and retained it after independence as the language of the Federal Assembly and of the Western and Eastern Regional Assemblies (Awoniyi, 1982:152). This means that Nigeria has a language problem. The attempts made in the first republic to ignore that Nigeria has a language problem failed. Consequently, subsequent Nigerian governments had to recognize that fact. The Nigerian government White Paper Known as the *National Policy on Education* (1981) is one of the most important and comprehensive policy documents in Nigeria's recent history. Proposed as 'a vision for Nigeria's future', it outlines a philosophy of education for Nigeria. The language policy in this document, as well as the specification of language use in the country's 1979 Constitution; the report of the Political Bureau (1987), the 1989 Constitution and the 1995 constitutional conference report, provided insightful hints about the emphasis and direction of language planning that is being envisaged for Nigeria.

Both the *National Policy on Education* (1981) and the 1979 and 1999 Constitutions worsen the Nigerian language problems. The *National Policy on Education* (1981) states in its language section that the three major Nigerian languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba shall be taught throughout the nation. It also states that a Nigerian child shall learn at least two of these three major languages other than his mother tongue at the Junior Secondary School level of education, while at least one of the three major languages would be learnt besides the child's mother tongue at the Senior Secondary School level. *The Policy* had earlier prescribed the use of mother tongue, or the language of the immediate community as the medium of instruction for the first three years of primary school.

According to the *1979 Constitution* (also repeated by the 1999 constitution):

The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English and in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, when adequate arrangements have been made thereof (Chapter V, section 51).

These statements from these two important documents of the Federal Republic of Nigeria suggest that the Nigerian government has raised the status of the three major languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba to national languages; so that instead of having one national language (Dada and Iyagba, 1991), Nigeria may eventually have three. This trilingual policy certainly settles, at least for the time being, the question of national language choice. However, it remains unclear whether and how their operation as national languages will affect the future role of English in the nation's affairs. One possibility is that they might further share in some of the other national functions that English presently serves exclusively, such as, use in the judiciary and legal system.

The fact still remains that *The National Policy on Education* and *The Nigerian Constitution* (1979 and 1999) opted for three National languages, instead of a national language. This is a problem on its own.

The Role of A National Language In National Reconstruction

There is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria is yet to have a national language. English is not Nigeria's national language. It could be regarded as Nigeria's official language. Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are national languages but none is a national language. The implication is that a national language does not exist in Nigeria. But a national language is imperative in Nigeria. A national language helps in fostering national unity and stability; which in turn create the kind of peaceful atmosphere required for meaningful development of the nation. A national language serves as a symbol of oneness. It shows evidence of completeness of independence, and achievement of nationhood and development.

Underdevelopment, timidity, primitivity and backwardness are signs of nations without a national language. Almost all the advanced countries in Europe and America do not have language problems. All of them have their national languages. They think like one, think fast and act fast. They do not have time for serious and prolonged dialogue as a result of difficulty in understanding one another.

Technologically, they are well advanced because the language they grew up with (mother-tongue) is still the language they use all the days of their lives. UNESCO (1951) had suggested that mother-tongue should form the foundation for a child's education. A situation whereby one language is used all the days of one's life makes it possible for things to move on naturally.

There are more ethnic nationalities in United States of America (USA) than in Nigeria. With the adoption of English as their national language, USA became a United Federation, with more than

two hundred million people. If not for the adoption of English as the national language after their civil war; by now they would not have been the most advanced country in the whole world. As a matter of fact, the only world power.

China, with almost two billion population has a national language. China is one of the advanced countries of the world; though an Asian country. China is among the world's big five; being a member of the Security Council, with veto power. Other third world countries like India, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, etc have developed socially, economically and technologically because they solved their language problems on time; and focused their energies on how to think like one and act like one. In these countries, cases of wars, coups or political instability are non-existent. Language barriers cause over eighty percent of political instability in politically unstable nations. Most of the Western Countries that are called advanced countries are not more superior to us in terms of brain or blood in their veins. But for the fact that they see themselves as one (because of language), they have been able to learn faster than us.

Some of the African Countries that are making progress in terms of social and economic development, could be attributed to the language question. The emphasis here is North African countries, where Arabic language has become their lingua franca. With Arabic as a common factor, they are more focused and progressive than countries in sub-Saharan Africa (except South Africa). There has been always unity of purpose among them because they have been expressing their thoughts, feelings and emotions in a common language.

The point being made here is that countries that planned and developed a national language are more economically and technologically developed than those that are not serious with the development of their national language. A national language is linked to the developing of national goals, national symbols, national philosophy, national culture and national rituals. This brings about national unity. Without unity and oneness, no nation can make progress. Our country Nigeria today is in a complete mess. Socially, economically and even structurally, the country is dancing naked. All the calls for the convocation of sovereign national conference is as a result of lack of trust among the federating units in the country. All these are occasioned as a result of different tongues in our system. English language we are using as the official language is alien to our culture. 'Nigerian' language should be developed without further delay, and adopted as our national language. When such happens, we will start to think Nigeria. And when we start to think Nigeria, we will have no option than to embark on national reconstruction because we have got a national language.

Recommendations

- (1) The government of the day should be bold and courageous enough to adopt one of our indigenous languages as the national language.
- (2) The government should be more serious in the development and promotion of our indigenous languages.
- (3) The government should de-emphasise the Pass in English as prerequisite for certification in Junior and Senior secondary schools.
- (4) The teaching and learning of English language should not be made compulsory in our schools, and examinations.
- (5) Our Constitution should recognize English language as an alien language, and should be treated thus.

Conclusion

The biblical account of tower of Babel summarises the importance of a national language for a nation. A group of people with one language, one culture and one thought pattern wanted to build a tower, so that they could get close to God; ostensibly to find out how and what God looks like. That was a good thought. They embarked on the construction of the tower. But immediately God changed their language to many languages; they could not understand themselves any more. They could not think like one anymore, they scattered. But if God had brought them together again and allowed them to speak and understand themselves again, they would have embarked on *Reconstruction* of their tower because they have rediscovered their *National Language*.

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