



The Role of Indigenous Languages in National Development: A Case Study of Nigerian Linguistic Situation

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Abstract

Indigenous languages are indispensable cultural legacies without which all forms of human interactions can be carried out. National development is the development of individuals in a nation. Individuals can develop educationally, socially, politically, economically, and culturally through interaction with government agencies that disseminate policies through various indigenous languages. Development indices such as internal cohesion, integration, unity, economic wellbeing and citizens' participation in governance are promoted through indigenous languages. Based on these assertions, the author studied the current linguistic situations in Nigeria and found that native languages play fundamental role on issues such as democracy, technology, metalanguage and linguistic globalization. There are however some challenges in the optimum utilization of these mother tongues. The major problems being orthographic inadequacy, the multiplicity of minority languages, linguistic desertification and deforestation and language endangerment. The author then suggests a way forward.

Keyword: Indigenous/endoglossic languages, exoglossic languages, metalanguage, endangerment, documentation, decamillionaire languages, linguistic desertification/deforestation

1. Introduction

Language is a distinctively human system of communication based on oral and written symbols. It is the vehicle through which people's culture is transmitted. It is an extremely important aspect of a community. It is an index of identity which serves as a repository of a people's culture, industry and exploits. It is language that differentiates the Homo sapiens from other animals. The most effective engine of a people's culture is their mother tongue. Indigenous languages are treasures of our culture and self-identity. In other words, it is the indicator of history and self-identification

(Solanke, 2006). Mother tongue is an indispensable cultural legacy with which all forms of human interactions are carried out. According to Nwadike (2004) it is the key to the heart of the people. If we lose the key, we lose the people. If we treasure the key and keep it safe, it will unlock the door to wealth or affluence.

2. National Development

National development can be regarded as a situation whereby people harness the resources at their disposal in order to have meaningful life. This development ranges from growth in education (intellectual growth), politics, economy, science and technology. In educational process, language (MT) is the main pillar through which man has to plan, instruct and evaluate programmes. The development of individuals in respect of their aspiration in the society means development of a nation. Individuals develop educationally, socially, economically, politically and culturally through their interaction with government agencies that disseminate ideas and policies through various media in the languages that the individual best understand. According to Aziza (1998) national development is a gradual and advanced improvement or growth through progressive changes in the socio-political life of the nation. Elugbe (2006) asserts that national development refers to the growth of the nation in terms of internal cohesion, integration, unity, economic wellbeing, mass participation in government, and educational growth.

3. Current State of Indigenous Languages in Nigeria

It is necessary at this point to identify the current state of indigenous languages in Nigeria in order to evaluate the worth, value and role of this resource in national development. Nigeria is a multilingual and multi-cultural nation with about 400 indigenous languages. These languages are very diverse linguistically, unequal in size and status, and are at different stages or levels of development. The orthographies of many of them have not yet been designed or developed. This means that many of them are yet to be committed into writing. The Nigerian linguistic situation can be variously described and classified as follows:

1. Three (3) foreign or exoglossic languages: English, French and Arabic. Awonusi (1990) calls these three exoglossic languages top level languages that are used for national and international communication. They are also regarded as world languages, with English and French being regarded as languages of colonization.

2. Four (4) very large languages: Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, and Pidgin. The three major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) are called "Decamillionaires" and they serve as regional Lingua Franca. Pidgin functions as a restricted Lingua Franca.
3. Nine (9) large languages: Edo, Effik, Ebira, Fulfulde, Idoma, Igala, Kanuri, Nupe and Tiv. These Nine languages described as network (Radio) languages are called Millionaire languages, and are used in the Nigeria mass media.
4. Twenty (20) medium-sized languages, many of which are called minority languages.
5. About 350 small size languages are also called minority languages.

Having described the Nigeria linguistic situation let us now discuss the role of indigenous languages (mother tongues, MT) as a catalyst in educational development which is an important index of national development.

Qualitative education in any nation is not a luxury, but an imperative to national development. In order to achieve national cohesion and unity Nigeria recognizes the importance of mother tongue education hence she states in her National Policy on Education (NPE) that the language of instruction in the primary school should be initially in the child's mother tongue or the language of the immediate community. Indigenous language is the most important tool with which society is organized. It is hardly possible to talk of national development without including the languages with which the people formulate their thoughts, ideas and needs.

Multilingual education is capable of eradicating illiteracy. It provides political awareness and sociopolitical stability. Government's programmes and policies reach the grassroots with the use of indigenous languages. National unity depends largely on mutual understanding of each others' language and culture, including interests. This is why Nigeria considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major Nigerian languages other than his own MT. Unity means strength or power, and it is language that unifies people. Indigenous languages therefore confer power on a nation.

4. Indigenous Languages and Child Development

Indigenous language or mother tongue is the language in which the child first learns to love and respect the mental heritage of his people and culture. Indigenous languages, Olaoye (2009) assets, perform the following functions in child development:

- **Instrumental function:** Mother tongue is used by the child for getting things done. He uses his MT to navigate life to maturity.
- **Interactional function:** The child uses his MT to interact with his parents, siblings, neighbours, peer groups, classmates and the people he meets. He uses MT to carry out speech act illocution, such as persuading, requesting, dissuading, apologizing, commanding, directing, warning, teasing or mocking and even abusing and praising. All these have perlocutory effects on what he does. He achieves his goals through these speech acts. Even adults also use these speech behaviours to achieve interactional objectives. When the child interacts with speakers of his MT, he learns more about the rules of speaking or socio-linguistic norms in the speech community, including of course the sanctions which go with the breach of the rules of speaking. He grows in native wisdom, knowledge and understanding. He learns societal ethos such as reciprocal respects for each others' opinions, humility, patience and other social values. He also imbibes positive moral attitude which makes him become a well-behaved, highly responsible, well-adjusted and disciplined citizen who shuns social vices like laziness, greed, avarice, corruption and other social vices. He thus becomes a man with high morality who can contribute positively to national development.
- **Regulatory function:** indigenous languages, particularly the child's mother tongue is used for controlling peoples' behaviour, through the following:
 - a. **Prohibition:** for instance the child or even the adult says "don't take my pen" don't cheat me, don't steal, don't do that, and don't forget me. For the adults we have don't urinate here, don't give bribe, don't engage in examination malpractice, don't commit crime, don't join bad groups. The child tells his parents don't beat me, don't abuse me, don't drink my tea. All these statements are to instill moral discipline or to mould people's behaviours. Mother tongue is being used as a law enforcement agency.
 - b. **Threat of reprisal,** especially if behaviour is not stopped. We hear parents say to their children or wards statements like "I will punish you if you do that again", I will seize your bicycle if you continue like this, I will stop you from following your sister if you don't behave well, or the school authorities saying to their students "you will go to jail if you don't stop cheating".
 - c. **Disapproval of behaviour:** as in "that is bad", "No, stop it", that is not done here.
 - d. **Emotional black mail:** We hear people say Eh! You will kill your mum like that, you will give your father hypertension, stop that! Are you following your father's footsteps?
 - e. **Categorization of behavior governed by rules and sanctions:** as in that is wrong, this is unacceptable.

All these regulatory statements help the child and even the adults to develop a sense of responsibility and refinement in behaviour.

- **Child rearing function:** Indigenous languages are a powerful weapon or instrument for child-rearing practices. Through precepts, rules of speaking, the use of body language, socio linguistic etiquette, the children are initiated into their parent's speech community. Through indigenous songs, folktales, stories, proverbs, adages, literature, children learn age-old wisdom, adult conversational skills, moral lessons, how to engage in dialogue and constructive criticism. Bakare (2000) asserts that MT has the capacity to develop children's curiosity, manipulative ability, flexibility, initiative, industry, manual dexterity and mechanical comprehension, all leading to self-confidence, resourcefulness creative reasoning and all-round development.

5. Indigenous Languages, Literature, Culture and National Development

A tripartite relationship between or among indigenous languages, literature and culture has been well established and documented (Olaoye 2002, Isyaku 2004). According to them, there is no literature without language. Culture and language too are inseparable and the trios are intricately interwoven. They play vital role in man's education and national development as will be seen in this section of the paper. Literature in indigenous languages is an art which entertains and instructs. It warns people of danger and instructs by opening people's eyes to a wide range of experiences and a deeper understanding of these experiences. According to Fatokun (1992) literature presents situations, interactions and oppositions. It suggests a wide range of value and attitudes. To understand a people and their culture one may have to turn to their oral and written narratives, their drama and poetry. A good piece of literature can be regarded as an authentic mirror image of its society and time. Through satire, proverbs and symbolism, literary artists communicate ideas, thoughts and feelings about social ills in the society which they criticize with prussic diction. Proverbs, for instance, are a lesson in prudence, generosity, patience and wisdom which are indispensable to the guidance of mankind and the stability of society. Literary artists use indigenous languages to ridicule or condemn anti-social behaviours such as corruption, assassination, political thuggery, religious intolerance, oppressive rule or dictatorship, any form of human degradation and undemocratic practices. Through historical literature our knowledge of the society is widened. According to Asade (2000) we learn from historical literature about seemingly immortal despots and their ignoble and sorrowful end, and that their mysterious death was engendered by the avalanche of atrocities and carnage they had masterminded and executed. This knowledge helps people in charting new and humanistic sociopolitical and economic course, which leads to a new world order. This is the contribution of literature to national development.

Culture is defined as the particular systems of art, thought and custom of a society. It is the whole way of life of a people, the social heritage that the individual acquires as a member of his group. It is the entire attitude, perception and specific traits of civilization that confer to a people and its place in the universe. These traits are speech norms, etiquette, ideologies, ethics, stereotypes, artifacts, technologies, intellectual production. Indigenous language is thus an indelible mark of a people's identity. According to Fani-kayode (2006) the core values of our people must be the pivot for national reforms. He enjoins that our traditional values should be embedded in honesty, transparency, respect for institutions, constituted authorities and the sanctity of human person and life. These core values are reflected in the people's identity, cultures, traditions and systems, most times encapsulated in their languages. A child that grows up guided by the positive values of the society will possess a healthy and progressive mind in adulthood (Opega, 2004). Therefore, the teaching and learning of indigenous languages, literature and culture will afford the learner an understanding of the problems of the society, and indeed, Nigeria. We cannot, therefore, overemphasize the importance of a society's indigenous languages, literature and culture as three interrelated sociolinguistic variables from whose milk the youth must drink in order to develop a healthy soul in a healthy body.

6. Indigenous Languages, Civic Responsibility and Democracy

The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides that citizens have among others the following: allegiance to the constitution, respect for its ideals and institutions as well as the National Flag, Anthem, Pledge and respects for properly constituted authorities. Other duties include protection and preserving public property, shunning fighting, official corruption and squander mania, contributing to the good name and defense of the country. Citizens have the right to vote and be voted for, freedom of movement, speech, association, and the right to human dignity, personal liberty and fair hearing.

- It is only through civic education that citizens can know their rights and civic duties, and indigenous language is the instrument for political, social and cultural education.
- Government's policies and programmes are often couched in English language technical terms beyond the understanding of the teeming illiterate populace. Government uses terms like privatization, commercialization, deregulation, federal character, economic melt-down, geo-political zones, zero allocation, federation account, monetization policy, nascent democracy, national re-branding, option A-4, gubernatorial candidates. Translating government's pronouncements, policies, the National Anthem, Pledge and programmes into Nigerian languages will make more meaning to the illiterate masses, and will bring about political awareness, which in turn will encourage participatory democracy which will reduce political apathy, and open citizens' eyes to their rights and privileges, thus reducing the chances of voter intimidation and rigging. The end result will be national development.

6.1 Indigenous Languages and Democracy

Language is an indispensable cultural legacy with which all forms of human interactions are carried out. It is capable of destroying or mending relationships. The creation of a new democratic culture depends on language for the articulation of democratic ideals. A given political thought is usually expressed by means of language. It determines the stability and success or otherwise of a given democratic experience. Political contests depend on the use of language, as in violent or abusive language. Indigenous language is a good language of persuasion. Songs are composed in abusive diction to denigrate people and their ideals. Campaign language is a social mask for hiding party's selfish motives. The umbrella as an emblem is a sign language. These symbols communicate deep meaning. The umbrella symbolically represents the provision of shade or shelter for protection against adverse weather conditions, poverty and material deprivation (Bako, 2004). Political speeches, slogans and emblems are expected to be goal-directed. If and when the business of the National Assembly is conducted in indigenous languages, national development will be accelerated.

6.2 Indigenous Languages and Technological Development.

Language is a vehicle of thought and the expression of culture. It expresses a people's way of life, their perception of things and their world view. This embodies their ideals and innovations which embrace respects for technological and scientific innovations (Ishima, 2004). Science and Technology can be acquired and better understood through the indigenous languages. For indigenous languages to be used for teaching and learning science and technology these MTs need to be developed in terms of their orthographies, spelling and vocabulary, including syntax and translation through the use of lexicographic strategies and the linguistic indigenization policy of borrowing, coinage, semantic extension.

7. Metalanguage

Metalanguage study or metalinguistics is a branch of linguistic study that deals with the relation of language to other areas of a person's culturally determined behavior such as the study of gestures, facial expression, voice quality, mannerism and other aspects of speech event that are not linguistically structured. Metalanguage is the language used to discuss or describe other languages. Language used in describing some technical terms and vocabulary of English is called metalanguage. Metalanguage according (Olalekan, 2001) is designed to take care of medical and scientific terms in English and other international languages which we do not know their equivalents in Nigerian languages. For instance, the NERDC's sponsored vocabulary of primary science and mathematics in nine Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Edo, Efik, Fulfulde, Izon, Kanuri and Tiv) is a clear demonstration of the capacity of Nigerian indigenous languages as tools for the development of science and technology. For instance, modern Yoruba Numerals have been designed as follows:

	Nomba	NombaIka-nnkan	NombaIpo
10	Ewaa	Mewaa	Ikewa/Kewaa
16	Efalewaa/Erindinlogun	Efalewaa/Merindinlogun	Ikefalewaa/Kefalewaa
20	Ogun	Ogun	Ikerindinlogun/Kerindinlogun
23	Etalelogun	Metalelogun	Iketadinlogun/Ketadinlogun
44	Erinlelogoji	Merinlelogoji	Ikerinlelogoji/Kerinlelogoji
100	Ogorun	Ogorun	Ogorun
102	Ejilelogorun	Mejilelogorun	Ikejilelogorun/Kejilelogorun

Scientific terms are also now available for the physical and biological sciences in Yoruba designed through translation equivalent and borrowing. For example we have the following:

a	English		Yoruba
	Physical Science	-	Sayensi Ohunailemi
	Antimony	-	Tiro
	Experiment	-	Asewo
	Granular	-	Eerun
	Hypothesis	-	Aba
	Lead	-	Oje
b	Translation borrowing through relexicalisation		
	ENGLISH		YORUBA

Alum	-	aalomu
Beaker	-	Bika
Gas	-	Gaasi
Litre	-	Lita
Mercury	-	Makuri
Bomb	-	Bombu
Blade	-	Biledi
Glass	-	Gilaasi

Other Yoruba scientific terms are also available in Yoruba Dictionary of Engineering Physics:

ENGLISH		YORUBA
Insulator	-	Alaabo
Alternator	-	Alaayigba
Pendulum	-	Asoro
Telescope	-	Awoorun
Prism		Digi-Osumare
Vibration	-	Igbongiri
Convergence	-	Ikorijo
Bomb	-	Ado oloro
Homogeneous	-	Obarakan
Telephone	-	Waya/ Ero ibanisoro

This specialized bilingual Yoruba dictionary of engineering physics published in 1993 is a clear indication of the adequacy of Yoruba language in the teaching and learning of mathematics, science and technology in Yoruba. The quadrilingual glossary of legislative terms (English, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba), published in 1992 contains terms and useful vocabularies for mathematics, social and natural sciences totaling 18,000 entries. This research break through in indigenous language re-engineering is capable of bringing about rapid educational development in the country. More research works need to be done in medical dictionary. For instance Veillon Nobel's Medical Dictionary could be translated to Yoruba and other Nigerian languages. Nigerian languages require rehabilitation, re-orientation and optimal utilization if they are to become potent instruments for national development.

8. Impediments to the Development of Indigenous Languages

Nigeria is a plural society with a multiplicity of languages and dialects competing for recognition. One of the greatest challenges in the optimal utilization of indigenous languages is that many do not have orthographies and those that are available are not well developed for literary use. Many indigenous languages are becoming moribund and are on their way to extinction, as a result of lack of use. Causes of endangerment, according to Elugbe (2006), range from conquest, lack of relevance, political domination, trade and negative attitude of some elites to enforced multilingualism. The negative attitude of the speakers has struck the death knell of their indigenous languages. The first sure sign of self-colonization is when one does not know enough of one's language (Solanke, 2006). According to Haruna (2006), there is serious desertification and deforestation in the linguistic landscape of northern region. There are cases of language death caused by what Yusuf (2006) calls suicide through over borrowing from prestigious languages, or murder through language policy. Something drastic has to be done to safeguard the endangered languages. Language documentation is the panacea to language death. It is incontrovertible that the loss or death of some indigenous languages is an irretrievable loss of the peoples' collective wisdom, that is people's cultures, traditional occupations, medicine, technology and terminologies. The richness of any nation, or any civilization, is a function of its language and culture.

9. New Horizons in Language Development

The development of indigenous languages in Nigeria is facing a lot of challenges, among which are lack of knowledge of the exact number of indigenous languages in Nigeria, haphazard research, inadequate funding of research, inadequate facilities, the intangibility of language, the ideological argument against the number of indigenous languages as evidence of disunity, and epileptic utilities. Hope is however not lost, because there is a way forward. It is therefore suggested that National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) and Linguistic Association of Nigeria (LAN), together with the departments of Linguistics and Nigerian languages in our universities, should work out best practices for the documentation of Nigerian languages. There is the need for government, NGOs, international bodies like UNESCO, UNICEF, the mass media and the speaker communities to fund language research so that our indigenous languages will serve as a veritable tool for national development.

10. Conclusion

The paper discusses the role of indigenous languages after identifying the current linguistic situations in Nigeria. The author finds that Nigeria, a multilingual nation, has both endoglossic and exoglossic languages and that both of them have different roles to play. The endoglossic ones classified into decamillionaire, millionaire and minority languages serve different functions. Mother tongue is used for civic and political education. Multilingual education, especially with the use of the native languages, promotes literacy, socio-political stability, national integration and unity in diversity. In child development, indigenous languages perform instrumental, interactional and regulatory functions. Democratic values, cultural transmission, technological development and linguistic globalization are the functions of indigenous languages. The challenges in the optimum utilization of these national resources can be removed through adequate language planning and documentation so that Nigerian indigenous languages will be a veritable tool for national development.

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