LANGUAGE, IDENTITY AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Dairo, A. Lekan

Abstract

Language is believed to be a means by which human thoughts are expressed, hence it defines and delineates the whole of human knowledge. People speak the way they think and every nation speaks according to the way it thinks, and thinks according to the way it speaks. Language is therefore tied to people's world views or cultural mindset, hence language is an index of human and societal identity as well as a major determinant of national development. This paper examines the relation of language, identity, and national development and concludes that language is an instrument of cohesion as well as an index of human and societal identity, and a major factor in national development.

Keywords: Indigenous language, cultural identity, national development, education policy.

Introduction

Going back to the early 19th century, two Gelman philosophers - Johann Herder and Wilhelm von Humbolt, observed that there is a strong link or relation of language, thought and culture. This particular idea was later picked up by the America anthropologists, Franz Boas, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf in what has come to be called the Linguistic relativity or Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.

What the hypothesis simply expressed is that a nation's language reflected the way its people thought according to the equation: One language = One folk = One nation. Herder, (1960: pp 99-100) as quoted by Wardhaugh (2013: 18) says:

If it be true that we ... learn to think through words, then language is what defines and delineates the whole of human knowledge ... In everyday life, it is clear that to think is almost nothing else but to speak. Every nation speaks ... according to the way it thinks and thinks according to the way it speaks.
What is indicated by the above is that there is always a link between language and world view (or cultural mindset). This is the same idea expressed by von Humboldt (1762-1835) when he says:

... there resides in every language a characteristic world view ... By the same act whereby (man) spins language out of himself, he spins himself into it, and every language draws about the people that possesses it a Circle whence it is possible to exit only by stepping over at once into the circle of another one.

The point being emphasized in the above quotation is the universality of human reason based on the universal human capacity for national thought.

It has been long observed by Sapir (1962) that language is a guide to social reality and this powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes. It is also rightly observed that human beings do not live in their objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity ordinarily, but they are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become a medium of expression for their society.

It becomes clear therefore that the real world is to a large extent, unconsciously built up on the language habits of a group of people. The conclusion one can draw from the argument above is that language is a nation's identity and identity makes a nation great.

Language and Nation Building

As recently published in the Punch newspaper (August 2011) Onwubiko, quoting a communication Lecturer at Novena University Ogumc in Delta state, says that language is a specific symbol system in a perfectly homogenous medium for handling all references and meanings that a given culture is capable of, whether in the form of actual communication or in that of such an ideal substitute of communication. The implication of this observation is that language is an index of human and societal identity and a force or factor of unity as well as that of national development.

In a speech by Vigdis Finnbogadotir, UNESCO's Goodwill Ambassador for languages and former President of Iceland, he reiterated that when a language is lost, everyone loses because a whole nation and culture lose their memory, and so does the complex tapestry from which the world is woven and which makes the world an exciting place.
A similar issue is what has been the underlying principle behind the political and educational ideologies of the Nigerian National Policy on Education (2004). The Political ideology states that National Unity can be attained through a common language while the educational ideology states that education can be enhanced through each child learning one other Nigerian indigenous language in addition to his/her own mother tongue. This means the power of unity and growth resides in the use of a common language.

Let us make a quick reference to the Tower of Babel in the Biblical days (Gen. 11:1-9). The strength of a common language led to the initial success recorded by the nations of the world as they were able to 'work in one accord: But as soon as God confused their language, they became disorganized and progress on the tower stopped forthwith. This experience is similar to that of a nation without a common language of her own. Common language fosters solidarity and gives strength for development.

The Language Situation in Nigeria Before Independence

Nigeria as a multilingual and multicultural society has between three to four hundred and fifty indigenous languages with no one of these languages culturally dominant. Although, three of the languages- Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba have been ranked as National Languages because of their being spoken by not less than fifteen million Nigerians and because they belong to the three major ethnic groups around whom political power revolved (Ajeigbe, 1987). A second group of languages described as Regional Languages include Fulfulde, Kanuri, Ijaw, Edo, Nupe, Idoma, Igala simply because their educational uses rank next to the National Languages. There are other languages regarded as minority languages because of their restricted local usage. That has been the linguistic situation of Nigeria before the introduction of English Language.

Nigeria, as a nation, has suffered a tremendous setback for lack of common language as a result of the plurality of languages, hence the state of the underdevelopment experienced over the years. At independence in 1960, English had already become fully established as the language of administration, legislation, education and judiciary. More interestingly, it had also become the language of social and inter-ethnic communication in a nation where tribes and tongues differ. Since then, English has become and still continues to be used as the language of international business and communication.
English and Nigerian Language Policies

Having established the fact that Nigeria is a multicultural nation whose indigenous languages have been suppressed by the super imposition of the English language, it is now realized that it has taken us (as a nation) too long to realize that the trend is dangerous to our existence as a race, however, we are now gradually waking up from our slumber through several efforts being put in place recently by scholars and many other concerned patriotic citizens who have always suggested that the earlier we go back to our roots, the better for us.

The danger of adopting a foreign language as a common language or 'national language' is colonization in terms of language, and culture and even of our brain and intellect. Today, in Nigeria, everything associated with the white race is superior while anything black is inferior. Our confidence has been eroded and debased; right or correct thinking is almost impossible. How then do we expect progress and development in the nation?

The Panacea for National Development

The earlier we realize that no two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality, the better for us as a nation. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct, not merely the same world with different labels attached. As a human race, we see and hear and experience things as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.

As a nation, we need to take some urgent steps to stem the tide of the impending extinction of our local indigenous languages and step up the progress and development of our nation. Language revival or revitalization which is possible either because there are existing records of the languages or through reconstruction based on similarities with neighbouring languages or dialects must be urgently pursued.

If this is not done urgently, the emerging trend is for our languages to lose ground totally in the face of English Language which of course, can have several other consequences for the indigenous languages and our speech communities. The most painful effect of this could be language death which may become irreversible for languages without written and/or oral records.

The second step is to encourage bilingual education which has now become a very popular option, though not a new phenomenon. In bilingual
education programmes, parents and community members want to be reassured that their children will not abandon their first language and culture, learn the second language without sacrificing curricular learning in any way.

Over the past half century, as societies have become increasingly multicultural, there have been many demands for specific language and literacy proficiencies in terms of maintaining, revitalizing and archiving the language of the non-dominant cultures and in acquiring languages of wider and official communication in response to these, experimental bilingual and multilingual education programmes have been developed, and they have grown into well-researchable educational alternatives that are now familiar options in schools around the world.

Bilingual education implies that the local varieties of our languages can be improved upon and be accepted as being in a sense, the manifestation of local cultural and linguistic identity. This, at the same time, will give opportunity for a sound and balanced education that will provide the learners access to different and varied social and cultural worlds thus enhancing vertical and social mobility and also increase awareness of both the immediate and wide environments. It is believed that this kind of education can foster self-esteem, self-identity and more positive attitude to life in general.

It can be argued that the use of English as the official language and medium of instruction in schools has become a formidable and impenetrable barrier to easy access to knowledge and information to many Nigerians as a result of the non-use of the languages of their immediate environment. This has also indirectly disengaged them from proper education thereby undermining the possible growth and development of their indigenous languages. Experiments have shown that children's intuitive knowledge can be enhanced by meaningful education through the use of their mother tongue or language of their immediate environment.

Going by the provision of the National Policy on Education (2004), the importance of language in education cannot be over emphasized. For instance, the document clearly states that the attainment of the political and educational ideologies is possible through effective use of people's indigenous languages because of the direct link between their culture and language.

The National Policy on Education (Section 4(e)) also emphasizes as a
of the aims of secondary education, the need to raise a generation of people who can think for themselves, respect the views and feelings of others, respect the dignity of labour, and appreciate those values specified under the broad national aims and live as good citizens. This is a critical factor by which members of a community can collectively develop their society.

The use of the indigenous language or language of people's immediate environment as the medium of instruction, most especially in the primary school system (NPE 15(4)) will enhance the development of people's intuition and consequently develop their intellectual creativity.

Inculcating the right values and attitudes for individual survival in the society and efforts to train people's minds in the understanding of the world around them will be readily attainable. With the use of indigenous languages as media of instruction in schools, children will become familiar with the world around them and also appreciate the positive and negative values and attitudes recorded in such languages.

The need to do away with the colonial mentality that has led to our overrating the status of the English language is long overdue. There is need for a balanced policy on the role of English language for the country such that the indigenous languages could play their own roles side by side. This will afford the nation an opportunity to have a policy that would suitably work with the practical objectives for the realization of the intended political and educational ideologies.

Conclusion

From the discussion so far, it is important that whatever policy is to be made for a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic community like Nigeria must consider the fact that Nigeria is made up of many ethnic nationalities with each group having a language attached to it. This consideration is paramount so that such a policy would be suitable for multi-lingual and multi-cultural development.

It must be realized that as much as the use of English Language as the language of unity cannot be brushed aside, we need to do away with the misconception that using other media of instruction will challenge the position of English as the nation's official language. We have to accept the fact that foreign languages cannot be satisfactorily sufficient for our desire and
aspiration for the kind of robust knowledge that can move the nation to a developed modern society of our dream.

As t:xperiments (Fafunwa, 1982; Macauley, et al., 1989) have shown that a Nigerian child would learn better through the use of his mother tongue as language of instruction and not through the use of English in the process of inculcation of permanent literacy and numeracy which is the major objective of the Nigerian Educational System, bilingual education is the best option. This same idea is expressed by Adegbola (2009:7) while commenting on Bamgbose's view thus:

DevelopJ11ent goals cannot be achieved by the fulfilment of the aspirations of an elite minority such as the acquisition of formal education through the use of an exclusionary foreign colonial language. If an appreciable segment of the population is excluded from development processes due to the imposition of an exclusionary communication strategy, a few would be made to bear the burden of the totality and the development process will manifest extremely low productivity as we continue to experience in Nigeria.

A similar view is expressed by Okwudishu (2006:35-36).as quoted by Adegoju (2008: 17) that:

It has been rightly observed that a national development that has not given a pride of place to indigenous languages as vehicles of national development is likely to be a wasted effort,... development in Africa should focus on the cultivation of a literate citizenry that can participate effectively in the socio-economic, political and cultural life of the nation. Development in this sense is human-based and languages chosen for that purpose must be those that will facilitate access to information for the masses at the grassroots.

References


