Adopting the Indigenous Nigerian Languages for National Development

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Abstract

The availability of different languages in different countries of the African Continent is a source of strength. It is a potential that should be harnessed to foster national integration through greater participation in the political process by the masses. However, the dominance of colonialists' language as "official language" has robbed the masses in African Countries the opportunity of participation in their political process because of the language barrier. This study highlights the reason why African languages are not being used in policy making and thereafter suggests remedies. It is the recommendation of this study that if policies are made in the language that the masses understand, greater participation would promote good governance.

Key   words: National   Development,   African   continent,   Colonialism, Multilingualism

Introduction

Language is very crucial to human existence. It is the means by which they communicate with each other. Language essentially differentiates human beings from animals. While human beings can create symbols and designs meaning to them, animals cannot. According to Langer (1953) language is a symbol of human feelings. As a weapon of development, language is employed to express a government policy. The degree of acceptance of any government policy is a function of the language through which the message is conveyed to the citizens. This is why language could be used as a tool for good

governance and there cannot be good governance without popular participation hi the political process by the governed. The distinguishing factor in language use is dependant, therefore, on its social implications and contextual relevance (Owuamalam, 2005).

The term "good governance" was first used by donor agencies in the eighties, led by the international monetary fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Good governance is the making and implementation of policies that would impact positively on the citizens of a country. It is a stick and carrot instrument being used by IMF for keeping in line errant developing countries that must match their request for aid with "good behavior". This implies that countries with satisfactory record of good governance could count on the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank for aid. On the contrary, those countries that have performed poorly in good governance, must improve to qualify' for adequate support (Ake, 1996).

At the First Annual African Governance Forum held in Addis Ababa on July, 1997, the then United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, identified peace, democracy, human rights and sustainable development as the four pillars of good governance (Sagay, 2005): while Salam Ahmed Salim, the former Secretary-General of OAU (now AU) emphasized quality leadership, sound management of the economy, a strong judicial system, as independent and responsible media as good governance. On the other hand, a representative of one of the donor agencies placed emphasis on education, participation in the political process, rule of law and transparency as elements of good governance. However, the consensus at the end of the meeting was a dialogue of elements embracing all the ones already mentioned as well as additional ones such as constitutional guarantees, political positions, fight against corruption, gender issues, empowerment and civil society (Bamgbose, 2005).

Language, which is an obvious prerequisite to good governance, is not mentioned in the list above. Yet it is true to say that there cannot be good governance unless the governed can participate effectively in the political process. Such participation involves having access to adequate information. It also means knowing, and being able to exercise one's rights. For all these to be done, the citizenry needs to gain access and that access can only be in language known too well (Ndolo, 2005). This is part of political socialization. According to Eleazu (1977), "nation building is the process of politically socializing the people into becoming good citizens of the political order and making the citizens feel they have a stake in the community worth fighting for".

In any democracy, the role of the people involves the essential ingredient of participation, representation and benefaction. Participation implies that broad decisions are made by the people (for example through an election or referendum) of any decisions made on their behalf must reflect the people's will. Beyond election people must be able of take part in social, economic and political processes (Musa, 2005). The implication of this is

that issues on which decisions are taken should be presented in a language that people understand. Their participation in other activities is to be ensured through the use of a language in which they are competent. Representations implies that those governing do so with the peoples' consent and see themselves as delegates of the people; there

must be communication between the people and their representatives. For the majority of the people, such communication is only feasible in several languages. Benefactions imply that the goal of government is the welfare of the people. The implied contract is that human, social and economic rights will be assured including rights to life, liberty, and justice, equality- before the law, shelter, and freedom from want and poverty. In order to take full advantages of these rights, people need to be aware of them and this they can only meaningfully do in a language that they understand. The problem of nationhood and national orientation can also be solved using the language paradigm to foster integration. Atimono (1981) sees the whole problem of nations building as that of national integration of all its components parts. He enumerates five instruments that are necessary for integration: common service, coordination of the society, propaganda and education, organization of the police and armed forces, ethnic problems and economic development. Thus language is dual instrument of national integration and of the ethnic problem, economic development which presuppose not only the suppression of ethnic conflicts, but also the development of solidarities.

The concept of national integration has been variedly defined. For Sagay (2005), it requires that identification with national community supersede in certain situations, more limited ethnic loyalties. Doro and Stultz (1970) argue that there are two different dimensions of integration, (a) territorial or horizontal, and (b) political or vertical. They explain that national integration in African usually refers to the process of achieving territorial integration that is subsuming the parochial loyalties of culture, region, language, ethnic and tribal groups to the over-riding interest of groups into a harmonious whole with equal access to national opportunities, resources and service. This study is of the opinion that the choice of indigenous languages as official medium through which the government communicates with the masses would encourage participation of the governed and popularize the policy of the government.

The crux of participation, as far as language goes, is the need for the people to be able to receive information and share their views in their own languages. It is the realization of this that the department of Arts and Culture in South Africa launched a scheme known by the acronym TISSA (Telephone interpreting service for South Africa) by which any citizen can make a phone call to any government department in his/her language and be automatically translated into any of the county's eleven official languages (Bamgbose, 2005).

The use of South African indigenous languages deepen democracy by giving access to crucial information and knowledge that benefits all the people of South Africa

especially those in the rural areas who are doubly deprived when services are available only in a language they cannot understand. It is the opinion of this article that pidgin English, Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Tiv, Idoma, Ijaw, Urhobo, Isoko, Itsekiri, Edo, Nupe, and any other language that is most used by any ethic group within Nigeria could be used as official languages. Through this media any citizen can make a phone call to any government department in his/her language and be automatically translated into any of the country's official languages.

Impediments to the Use of Language as a Tool for Good Governance

The success of language as a tool for good governance has been impeded by many factors caused by bans on regional languages, infectious diseases, wars, migration and cultural assimilation (Punch, 2006). But, principally these factors are: language policy and ignorance. Bamgbose (2005) asserted that there are some features of African language policies that have impacted negatively on the ability of most of the African population to participate effectively in the educational, social-economic and political systems.

Firstly, the impact of colonial rule is still in Africa and this has been expressed in the colonial language policies being perpetuated in the continent decades after independence. This is very glaring in the language-medium policy in most African schools, which relegate African languages to primary schools level or even ignore them altogether in a child's education. In addition, literacy is acquired largely through the school system and many children and adults have not had the opportunity of going to school. Thus illiteracy remains a major source of exclusion and as such, language could not have contributed.

Secondly, the dominance of imported European language manifested in various areas. In the educational system, the poor use of African languages as media of learning and teaching is largely responsible for high level of failure and dropout in the school system in many African countries. In the designation of official languages, of the 65 official language in 53 Mi can countries, French is the official language in21, English is 19, one or more African languages in 10, Arabic in 9, Portuguese in 5 and Spanish in 1. Apart from five countries where Arabic is the sole official language, only three countries have an African language as the sole official language (Bamgbose, 2005).

Although a number of African languages are declared as joint official languages with a foreign language, the foreign official language tends to dominate in the so-called joint relationship. In the media, most of the material available in written and electronic communication, publishing, library and archival resources is in the dominant foreign language. Even in the cultural sector where African languages are expected to be dominant, literature in the foreign languages is more popular.

Thirdly, multi-lingualism *is a* feature of most African Countries that is either viewed with disapproval or grudgingly accepted. This has been exhibited by countries that are pre-occupied with monolingual policies and practices that hinder- communication and

participation in the political process. With the exception of a few countries such as South Africa, most African countries have not given due recognition to the linguistic diversity in their communities. To choose one language and leave out others is to deny the nation the contribution that the oilier languages can make to national development.

Fourthly, there is marginalization of the so-called minority languages. The same augments in support of acceptance of multi-lingualism are also valid, for minority language rights are human rights. Any calculated measures to curtail or deny the use of one's language in an area in which such use is feasible, amounts to a violation of the person's human rights.

Fifthly, fluctuation and instability in policy are directly linked to political instability as have been observed in Africa. The glaring lack of consensus on given policies does not oblige successive governments to inherit and carry on with their predecessors' policies. This is responsible for the frequent changes in language policies in several African countries.

Finally, the formulation of language policy without a corresponding plan of action for implementation is a problem in Africa. Policies are riddled with escape clauses, which in effect protects policy makers from the law in event of failure of implementation. The failure to pay serious attention to language implementation policies questions the commitment of policy makers. The most important constraints in the implementation of language policies are not funds, personnel or material but political will.

Conclusion

From the fore going it is obvious that what constitutes obstacle to language as tool for good governance could be remedied. Because of the existence of several ethic groups in Nigeria, for example, the need to communicate to these groups in-one distinct language becomes imperative for national integration (Blake, 1979). The communication of government policies to its citizenry must be done in the language that the people understand.

There is an urgent need for well formulated national language policy in Nigeria in order to de-emphasize colonial language policies. There should be a corresponding plan of action to implement to the letter, every detail that would make indigenous languages part of primary and secondary school curricula. It is my hope that the implementation of language policy will be accorded the political will it deserves to ensure its success. Government should make fund, personnel and material available to that effect.

In Nigeria, for example, in the absence of a national language policy, the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), has to adopt the policy of "grassroots broadcasting". This policy uses multi-lingual broadcasting to mobilize all Nigerians for the purpose of national integration and it reflects the socio-political *reality* of the nation. Furthermore, Nigeria should copy the example of South Africa whose Department of Arts and Culture launched the Telephone interpreting service for South Africa. By this, any

citizen can make a phone call to any government department in his/her language and the message will be automatically translated.

Furthermore, literacy should equally be encouraged to enable greater part of the population to know how to read and write. Since literacy is acquired largely through the school system and many children as well as adults have not had the opportunity of going to school, illiteracy remains a major source of exclusion. It is also well known that in Nigeria there are persons who are proficient in several languages. This is an asset, which can be harnessed to the great advantage of Nigerians. These experts should be employed in the school system while mass literacy campaign should be embarked upon using indigenous language(s).

Nigerian languages should be declared as official languages and should be used in the media, in written and electronic communication, publishing, library and archival resources as typified in Kenya and Tanzania where English language and Swahili is being used. Teaching and learning material that are being made available should be in Nigeria languages. Nigeria should endeavour to give due recognition to the linguistic diversity in the country. Language rights should be acknowledged as human rights by Nigerian leaders and generally accepted in enlightened circles. The marginalization of the so called minority languages should also be discouraged. Fluctuation and instability in language policy must be checked by reaching a consensus on language policies in the country. Frequent changes in language policy in education must be stopped forthwith (Bamgbose 2005).

The adoption of English language as lingua franca has led to the acceptance of the Nigerian pidgin. No indigenous language performs the function of national integration like the Nigerian pidgin. It has speakers in all the 36 states of Nigeria.

The Nigerian pidgin is used extensively in all aspects of life. All Nigerian national laws and regulations are written in Standard English but these laws are enforced by the law enforcement agents using the pidgin. It is, therefore, the unofficial language of the armed forces, the police, the prisons, businessmen and women. However, one noticeable shortcoming of the Nigerian pidgin is a lack of standard orthography, grammar and syntax. However, if the government promotes it to an official status, consistent usage and spelling will be easier (Ndolo, 2005).

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