

MOTHER TONGUE AS ACATALYST FOR CULTURE REVIVAL

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Abstract

The role of mother tongue cannot be overemphasized in our country where language contributes greatly to the development of our culture. Human beings are insatiable and always pursuit material and non-material things which affected all activities of man both social, economical, political, educational and religion. All these activities have language at its nucleus. Language is one of the attributes of human beings which characterize their behaviour and means by which we control, create and preserve our culture, because man cannot live without language. To do a thorough work on this, a survey research method was used with available literature on the topic reviewed and necessary materials collected to widen the horizon of the researchers which helped to determine the extent to which mother tongue can be used in revitalization of our culture which is a herculean task of this paper. Findings reveal that the recognition of the significance of mother tongue in culture revitalization is of much value and should be cherished and preserved. This paper has among others examined four major sections which include introduction which deals with the concept of mother tongue, the role of mother tongue in culture revitalization, the importance of culture and the problem facing the growth of our culture. It concludes by giving possible recommendations and conclusion was made.

Introduction

In Nigeria, we have about 400 languages spoken all over the country. Among all these languages, it has been observed that Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are the three major Nigerian languages and without all these languages there will be no meaningful existence because language embraces all that we do be it social relation, conventional mark for recognition, identification, attributes of behaviour to name but a few we talk about language, (Oparah and Amaechi, 2014).

Language is a means of conveying information and the greatest attributes that characterize human beings. Through language we can control, create and preserve our culture, without language knowledge cannot be imparted, message cannot be passed from generation to generation, (Okereke, 2011).

Igbo language is language spoken in the eastern part of Nigeria. According to Apakama (2009:4) Igbo language is a specialized vocabulary used by a particular group of

people called the Igbo. It is a language spoken in the states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo and some parts of Delta, Rivers and Cross River States. The Igbo people can also be found outside the Igbo cultural areas such as North, West and South in search of greener pasture. That is why Ubahakwe (2002:252) opines that “Igbo people carry their language beyond their immediate ethnic neighbours, ... and the people enterprising talent. “Yes, the Igbo people can be found beyond their ethnic group and all over the world and the language has both national and international recognition. In West Africa Igbo language belong to kwa sub-family language which share certain traces of structural similarities to those relating to word root or stem, (Oparah & Amaechi, 2014).

Mother tongue can be defined as the language of the immediate environment where a child was born. Apakama (2017:1) sees mother tongue as “... nne, ire ebe mother bu nne, tongue aburu ire. Ma ndi okachamara huru ya dika asusu nwafo muru n’ulo nne na nna ya maobu asusu mbu nwata muru, o kachasi n’okpuru nne na nna ya.”

Mother tongue is very important in every human interaction. It is used to achieve many functions in the course of training a child, for instance, the mother uses her language to talk to a child, console a child when crying, sing to the child to make him happy, play with the child, express her feelings both negative and positive, the child at the same time watching the mother, laugh when the mother is laughing and crying when the mother shout. This is done through the use of mother tongue which is the first language of a child. Akano (2011:202) added that:

...the origin of language coincides with that of society given the fact that a system of linguistic communication is a necessary condition for the existence of a human group. Again it is language that enables man to achieve a form of social organization whose range and complexity was different in kind from that of animals. Whereas the social organization of animals is mainly instinctive and genetically transmitted, that of man is largely learned and transmitted verbally through the cultural heritage.

No wonder National Policy on Education (1998:9) states the importance of the three major Nigerian languages as a national language, as language for initial formal education and language for immediate communication. However, every child must learn a language of the immediate environment to promote our social interaction, national cohesion and preservation of our culture.

Language Situation in Nigeria

We have thirty-six (36) States in Nigeria and about one hundred and twenty million people with ethnic groups of about two hundred (200) speaks varying languages, (Omego, 2005). As a multilingual country, Nigeria has over four hundred (400) indigenous languages that exist alongside with foreign languages like English language, French language, Arabic language and Pidgin English, (Alamu and Ugwoke, 2000). Out of this figures mentioned by Alamu and Ugwoke, only few has a handful standard orthographies and standard written varieties. They are Housa, Igbo and Yoruba. While Ejele (2003) includes Efik, Fulfude, Kanuri, Tiv, Edo, Igala, Izon, Urhobo and Nupe which have

tradition of writing and some written literature, etc. Other languages in Nigeria have no standard Orthographies and written literatures.

Nigeria is the most populous nation in Africa ruled by the indigenous politician from their States. The people are grouped into States so as to speak the same language and understand each other and communication becomes very easy. Of all this number of languages, three (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) are spoken as a national language which the Nigerian National Policy on Education 2004 makes provision for initial formal education, immediate communication and for wider communication.

In Nigeria, English language, French and Arabic are exogenous languages. English is the official language in the sense that the nation uses it for official business, education, literary purposes, language of government, commerce, industry, law, administration and for wider communication. According to Omego (2005:200) “English is regarded as the language of power” people learn English language in order to find employment and for economic advantage.

French language has remained a subject of instruction from lower basic to university education. This came into being since after independence, (Okwudishu, 2002). Now in Nigeria French language is the second official language which has being in the school curriculum as one of the subjects studied in the schools. Arabic is learnt in Northern Nigeria just for religious purpose especially in Koranic schools by Arabic missionaries and many of them know Arabic better than English Language. While Pidgin English is one of the languages in Nigeria popularly known as Nigerian English. Which serves as Lingua Franca. According to Mann (1990) Pidgin English has more speakers than any other languages in Nigeria. It is easier to acquire and is non-tribal language. Mann (1990) went further to say that the language has not been accorded official recognition in Nigeria despite the wider usage in communication.

Apart from all these languages that exist in Nigeria, mother tongue is principally the language of instruction in both lower basic, middle basic and higher basic level of education, that is to recognize the importance of language in Education. The teaching of these three major languages in schools will help our people have knowledge of their culture which will inculcate unity among them.

Importance of Culture

The word culture according to Eliot (1948) n Ajah (1996) “includes all the characteristic activities and interests of people” while Tylors (1871) in Ajah (1996) sees culture “As the totality of a people beliefs, ideas, attitudes, artefacts, etc” In conjunction with all these definitions culture means the totality of the peoples way of life, which includes the creation of man, behavioural patterns, institutions of a human group, what he learns what he shares social life, customs, religious life, value systems and symbols. All these expressions are referred to the way of life of a people, and people who abide by all these expressions are said to be cultured because their way of life is congruent and expected societal pattern of behaviour.

Culture is very important to every human being, in the sense that it inculcates in them the mechanism for adjustment and conforming to them accepted norms and values which the community required to promote societal development and make it necessary for the society to live in harmony.

A great regard is shown to our culture because of its nature and qualities of cultural heritage, it is admired and cherished. Our culture have the quality of refining and develop humanity both mental and physical endowments. Culture inculcates the right values which the society wants. Abba (2014:2) succinctly puts it:

He rejects notion that education is schooling, and instead describes it as the learning of “culture”. The really significant education impact must be concerned with the inculcation and understanding of moral values, certain cultural symbols, sanctions and cosmological beliefs

In view of this, our cultural values, beliefs, and moral codes are passed down from generation to generation through education and culture harmonizes our social life through the customs and traditions which are good step to right direction.

Problems Facing the Growth of Igbo Culture

The problem of Igbo culture has been a long-standing one and could be traced from the coming of the white men with his new mode of thought and teaching and also impose their European life-style on the people both economic, political and cultural powers in the name of colonialism, which subsequently killed the culture of the Igbo man. Thus their democratic power and religion was erroneously used blindly against our culture. These automatically brought different dimensions o the society. That is why Maduka (2007:14) opines that:

... the subject peoples of the world who are the victims of the powerful propaganda of their versatile information technology tend more or less to uncritically accept the ideological position of the Europeans, hence their proclivity toward committing cultural suicide by accepting as barbaric and primitive highly valued practices of their ancestral past ... it has brought to the virtual fetish attachment of most of the Igbo to English (the language used by their colonizers to subjugate them to the British way of life) and their total neglect of their mother-tongue. “There is no gainsaying the fact that over 98% of the Igbo are illiterate in Igbo, a total victory for English linguistic imperialism

Secondly, the educated elites prefer using English language rather than Igbo language, because to them it is easy to think/reason and to talk in English language. This is because they find Igbo language very difficult to speak while those living in a rural area i.e. the illiterate dwellers who speak only Igbo language feel deserted while discussing issues with them.

As it stands now, Igbo language is denied the opportunity to function in certain situation like in counting money in Igbo language, people prefer to count money in English language than in Igblanguage in spite of the fact that their equivalents exist in Igbo language.

In our local community meetings, their proceedings are more of English language and even cultural activities like taking of oath during installation ceremonies of some traditional rulers are discussed in English language, records are taken in English language, irrespective of the fact that many of them are illiterate of English language.

The transmission of knowledge from generation to generation is being done in English language that is why in some families now, the children hardly speak Igbo language because every instruction is given in English language. The question is where are the parents leading these children to? How will their future look like because very soon they will change their Igbo name and surname to English language.

In schools especially private owned schools, they no longer teach Igbo language not to talk of allowing the pupils to speak the language. Maduka (2007:15) expressed anger on ohanaeze ndi Igbo when he said:

The Ohaneze, the apex Igbo socio-cultural organization, is yet to give prominence to the use of Igbo in its deliberations, especially as love and harmony reign when crises in monolingual communities are resolved through the use of the mother tongue ... the transmission of the knowledge of the language from generation to generation is frustrated through the virtual banning of its use in some families and schools.

Yes, in government owned schools, students pay fine to the class for speaking Igbo language, which is bad and the negative impact is what we the Igbo are experiencing today.

Commitment is a matter of orientation, since the language is not in use the societal moral values and beliefs which is the culture cannot be transferred in a foreign language like English or French. For instance when you tell a young girl not to have a boy friend in English language, the girl will look at you as not being real because English girl will not talk without mentioning her boy friend. But when you tell a girl “emekwala enyi nwoke” is against our culture in a raw Igbo language, the girl will be afraid of going close to a man, because Igbo language is geared towards shaping the peoples world view and defending our culture which is the product of the language. A child who is not grounded in his mother tongue is lost in every ramification and can be found in English language or French language and his lifestyle will be channelled that way, definitely it will be disastrous in the sense that, the baby is a total stranger in his fatherland.

Role of Mother Tongue in Culture Revitalization

The role of mother tongue in culture revitalization cannot be over emphasized. No wonder Fishman (1984) and Okonkwo (1979) in Akano (2011) insist that language associated with culture more fully than others. They believed that the distinction artefacts convention, concerns values and beliefs of any culture are more naturally being expressed by its language. Even the government appreciates the importance of mother tongue as a means of preserving people’s culture.

Mother tongue is a language used by a group of people in a community which every member agrees and accepted it as a medium of expression. In that view Akano (2011:203) added that:

Words and sentences are used as they are only, because the speakers in a language community agree on such matters: and that there is a set of community norm operation, principles, strategies and values that guide the production and interpretation of speech which is termed the community ground rules for speaking.

Language always keeps pace with the social aspect of life of the language users, people get adapted to any given community with its culture and values through language. Language and culture are interwoven in the sense that language x-ray peoples beliefs, values and needs, which is present in the culture of its speakers. Culture determines how people in a given community think and feel, directs their action and defines their outlook, which is present in the culture of its speakers.

There are no aspects of life that does not require the use of language, be it Igbo, English or French language. Can you imagine a society without language? Language is very important be it in politics, social, economics, commerce, education and otherwise.

Language is at the centre of social interaction and when in use, it accomplishes things and achieves deep social and intellectual satisfaction, (Finegan, 2008). Language aids interaction which expresses meaning between people and every spoken word has its impact on both side, that is the speakers and the hearers that shows what is said matters to the hearer. According to Ihezuonu (2014:127), “it is language that provides the available ideas and categories with which we think and upon which we act.”

Looking at language in every ramification, there is power in language which is capable of reviving our culture through effective communication, and functional language develops individual and the society politically, socially, culturally and educationally. With language the continuity of our culture is sure, and we will have ideas on how the society is being governed.

Recommendations

The paper recommends that:

- Government should enforce the compulsory use of mother tongue such as (Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba) as a medium of instruction from lower basic to tertiary institutions.
- More teachers who specialize in this mother tongue should be produced for effective teaching and learning of the language.
- Every parent must allow their children to speak their mother tongue at home, because today’s parents prefer their children speaking foreign language at home instead of their mother tongue. If these children lose their language, they eventually lose their culture because language is pivotal to the survival of any culture.

Conclusion

Language seems to be one of the most important weapons for culture revitalization and the use of mother tongue in a society is determined by the cultural values, whereas mother tongue is seen as the expressed culture of a people and ignorance of the mother tongue will certainly lead to cultural breakdown.

Culture impinges on mother tongue for its survival and language always keeps pace with the social development of the society. So in light of the role of language in culture revitalization, mother tongue should be given more attention and effort should be made to improve the language in our schools.

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