

Enhancing National Integration and Unity among Nigerian Youths through Language

Ndibe Princess Ngozi

Department of Igbo and other Nigerian Languages

Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe

+2348069013071 princessladyp8@gmail.com

Abstract

Language has been identified as the live-wire of the society and the means for ensuring continuity of purpose and existence, stability, growth, and development in the society. In a multilingual and ethnic setting such as the Nigerian nation, language is a very relevant tool in the process of achieving national identification, unity of purpose, national integration and development. It is no longer news but a norm that language is used as an effective instrument for promoting national consciousness and unity development as well as inclusion. Language through its pragmatic and declarative means has played important roles in enhancing the socio-economic and political development of our country, which has resulted in the literary and cultural development as seen in the field of arts and handicrafts. In the course of maintaining that language enhances national integration and unity amongst Nigerians, this paper looks at the concept of language, national integration and unity. It goes as far as establishing language as an agent of national integration and unity. In view of the above, the researcher discovers that English language has been and will continue to play a major role towards inculcating national consciousness and unity amongst Nigerian youths. Thus, this paper examines English as a unifying tool and its mediatory roles in Nigeria as a multilingual and multi-ethnic society. It highly recommends that government and policy makers do well by adopting English as a national language but should see how they could develop a home-made national language that will complement the role of English in our nation's history. Youths should as a matter of concern need to learn to tolerate and co-habit with one another peacefully irrespective of their cultural backgrounds.

Introduction

Language is a veritable instrument, as well as a relevant tool in the process of achieving national identification, prestige, honour, unity, and development. Yusuf (2012) asserts that in multilingual societies such as Nigeria, language which can be used as an effective instrument for national development and the promotion of national consciousness and unity can also be used as a weapon for inclusion, marginalization and or exclusion. When the former as observed in Yusuf's assertion is maintained, unity and integration is enhanced, but when the latter is allowed, it destabilizes a nation as it sets different linguistic groups against one another in an attempt to fashion out an identity for themselves and express their existence and or relevance to the society. This scenario can be found in Nigeria, where language has been the sole factor in group integration and at times disintegration.

Obviously, one of the dominant and pervasive problems Nigeria and indeed Africa has, is the language issue. Another problem is that of religion but it is not the subject of discussion in this paper. Language, being a potent vehicle of transmitting cultural norms, values and beliefs from generation to generation remains a central factor in determining the overall status of a nation, especially amongst the youth who are seen as the productive hub of the entire population. This informed the submission of Isayev (1977) that language is a nation's most important asset. There is no such thing as a nation without a common linguistic basis from Isayev's observation. It is important to note that for national integration, unity, cohesion and development to thrive, there must be a language capable of doing it, and must be acceptable by all in the administration and running of a nation's affairs. In order to achieve this, English

language remains the most suitable option because it remains a general language for government and business.

In a multi-lingual ethnic and religious society like Nigeria and most African countries, the problem of forging ahead, a situation in which languages compete and scramble for national recognition or official status, whether indigenous or foreign, always rears its head to be on top. But in the real sense of it, only one language must be the official language (the language of administration, education and trade at a great level). Consequently, English language has taken the position of official language in Nigeria, without which, the unity of Nigeria as a nation with diverse ethnic groups and languages would be most improbable, if not out rightly impossible.

As viewed by Bamgbose (1991), English is the language of integration in Nigeria, amidst the compounding complexities of Nigeria, especially in relation to the language question. The only language that indexes the spirit of togetherness is English, because it is the language of instruction, the media, and that of government in Nigeria. This shows clearly that so far in Nigeria, English language has played a very important part in keeping the nation together as a unified nation. Amidst our cultural diversities and differences in belief, English language is still playing a great role in keeping the nation together. And since it is the connection between the various ethnic groups that exist in Nigeria, one cannot but give that plus to English language in keeping us going. Out of over 500 languages and dialects that we have in Nigeria, we still have a link that enables us communicate effectively with one another and that link is nothing but English language. This has served as the common means of communication between the different tribes that are in Nigeria (Ansa,2004). Bamgbose (1991) maintains that of the entire heritage left behind in Nigeria by the British at the end of their colonial administration, probably, none is more important than the English language. It is now the language of government, business and commerce, education, the mass media, literature and importantly as the means of external communication.

In view of the above, it is pertinent to examine the role of language as an agent of national integration and unity among Nigerian youths. This is very important because the vision and future of our country lies in the hands of our youths. Because they are filled with tremendous and growing ambitions, it will be a great disaster for our nation when they are not united, but invaluable and beneficial to the nation when they are united to champion our national goals and objectives. This has necessitated this paper.

The Concept of National Integration and Unity

Integration is an act or process of making fragments whole. It means fitting together as a community segmented ethnic minorities. To integrate means 'to incorporate 'or to combine.' However, national integration has to do with fostering a sense of belonging, a feeling of oneness or a sense of unity amongst members of different or diverse ethnic groups. According to Bamgbose (1991) national integration means the preoccupation of ensuring the continued oneness of a state as well as forging a bond of belonging together as nationals of the state amongst its citizenry. He went further to imply that national integration is often fostered through a series of overt measures designed to reinforce the sentiment of oneness. By this, it means that the national integration process must be on open system that will be made manifest in an obvious manner such that all will see it as a rule and or principle that binds us together as one.

In the words of Alexandre as quoted in Anse (2004), national integration is defined as consisting of creating or strengthening within the borders of a country, a collective sentiment of belonging together irrespective of individual or subgroup differences. In an ideal system, national integration should be a natural consequence of people coming together to form a nation, where the nation is seen as representing the site whereby life is led and endows existence with meaning both in the present and future. Sternson (1991) opines that a nation is a social group with a consciousness of coherence, unity and particular interest. The criterion of consciousness or awareness is important in the concept of nationhood. This is why our National Policy on Education states that one of its goals is to ensure national consciousness and unity amongst Nigerians. The people have to be conscious of their desire to stay together as one and of

“their demand for self determination”. To this end, let government at all levels seek the advice of language experts on how best to foster unity amongst nationals of our nation. All hands need to be on deck to attain the goals of national integration and unity and give total attention to this course of oneness which must be achieved through language, tolerance, mutual understanding, education and the rule of law.

The Concept of Language Defined

Language is a means of communication. It is a means of expression of thoughts, ideas, feelings and emotions. The meaning of language goes beyond merely communication of ideas but expression of oneself and maintaining of relationships existing among various groups of individuals. Trugil (1983) asserts that language is not simply a means of communicating information; it is also a very important means of establishing and maintaining relationships with other people. The Encyclopedia Britannica (2002) explains that language is a system of conventional spoken or written symbols by means of which humans as members of a social group and participants in its culture communicate. By this definition, one understands that language is for humans, it uses symbols which are meaningful to the users, it can either be in oral or written form, and it is used for communication of ideas, beliefs, feelings and cultural practices.

In the words of Yule, (1985) language is purely human and a non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. From this definition, it is obtained that language is human, which means that only human beings possess language, and that language is learnt and not genetic. By being non-instinctive, it means that language is not transferred from mother to child. The child acquires or learns language of their environment. Going further, Wilson (1986) views language as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates. This definition conforms to the unity already mentioned, since it talks about cooperation and interpersonal relations which human beings exhibit.

Yusuf (2003) outlines the features of language to include means of communication, its arbitrary nature, (i.e. not representative or iconic) purely human phenomenon, system of symbols, primarily vocal and form of social behaviour. Language equally possesses such properties like being learnt, creative, structured, meaningful, referential, discourse and interpersonal.

Language as an Agent of National Integration and Unity

It is indeed true that language is only one of the various means of integration and hence integration amongst individuals and subgroups in a state or nation, but it is believed, like other scholars, that language is actually the “key” to national integration. National integration is often and keenly fostered through a series of overt measures designed to reinforce the sentiment of oneness (Bamgbose, 1991). Power sharing, through zoning of political and bureaucratic positions, (a legal requirement for a multi-ethnic base for political parties) are special programs of the government designed to bring young people together. These include the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), National Youth Council of Nigeria (NYCN), Youths Participation in Politics, Not Too Young to Run Initiative, e.t.c

The success of these measures will in this discussion and opinion, depend largely on the ability of the participants to communicate effectively with one another on mutual ground. Take for example, in Nigeria, where such measures which were designed to “provide a focus on national identity” were first and foremost subjected to ethno-linguistic analysis and interpretations before nationalistic interpretations, failed to attain its goals and stated objectives. This is because in Nigeria, language loyalties are sometimes tremendously more powerful than any other kind of loyalties like socio-political or religious loyalties (Ansa, 2004).

The encouragement and subsequent institutionalization of the similarities and differences in ethnicity and language amongst Nigerians, especially the Youths as seen in the promotion of the “quota system” has far reaching implications on national integration and unity. The animosity and distrust which have arisen amongst the various ethno-linguistic groups are very glaring, thought-provoking and frightening and they permeate every terrain of interaction among youths of different ethnic diversities in Nigeria. The observable tradition of highly localized loyalties has impeded the development of a widespread political consciousness of the Nigerian nation (Bamgbose, 1991). Nigerians first see themselves in terms of their individual ethnic affiliations before seeing themselves as a people of one nation.

Nigeria is in dire need of a deliberate policy which will seek to highlight the things that can be made common amongst Nigerians of various ages, educational levels, socio-economic levels, religious affiliations and ethnic backgrounds which can be formulated by the government, and be maintained by its arms and tiers from time to time. One of the things which could be made common amongst Nigerians is language. It is of general belief that language can be used to integrate Nigerians; this is because language is not only a mirror of the society but can also be used as the medium to influence, condition or manipulate the people in the society. English language is there to help only if we are ready to tolerate one another and see ourselves as one.

English as a Unifying Tool among Nigerians

English serves as the language of nationalism, concerned with political integration and efficiency (Bamgbose, 1991). The language brings all the supposed “nations” of Nigeria to function as one. Nigeria is a country with many ethnic groups and nations such as Hausa nation, Igbo nation, Yoruba nation, Tiv nation, Fulani nation, Edo nation, Jukun land, Urhobo land, Igala nation etc. However, the cohesion and integration of those nations under the coinage “Nigerian nation” is possible through English language. In other words, without English the ubiquitous violent ethnic groups such as Oodua People’s Congress (OPC), Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Arewa People’s Congress (APC), Ijaw Youth Solidarity (IYS), Niger Delta Militant Group, and other groups would have found more justification for desiring to secede from the Nigerian nation.

Ironically, English is also the language of nationhood and nationalism (Yusuf 2003). This is because the love for the country as a whole has to be manifested through the language “intelligible” to all and sundry, if not the ‘ethnic agenda’ would always be enthroned other than national interest. This reason accounts for why nationalists like Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, and Ahmadu Bello had to use English language as a weapon for nationalist struggle. A nationalist expresses his patriotic views in English language. If English language is not used to express the ideas for which a nationalist is known for, he becomes an ethnic jingoist or a tribal apologist. Indeed however, English is the language of authenticity and reform in Nigeria till date.

As a language of wider communication (LWC), English language is used for phobic expressions, ceremonial purposes as an instrument of keeping records, information dissemination, self-expression, and embodiment of thought among the various linguistic groups in Nigeria. The common linguistic basis that constitutes a requisite for the existence of any nation is provided by English. So with English as the common tongue to all the youths of various ethnic diversities, the collective sentiment of belonging together despite the cultural or ethnic differences is forged.

It is an obvious fact that the language which has held Nigeria together up to date to a greater extent has been English language. It was passed on to us by our colonial masters, and so far, it has played that role very well. In our official day-to-day communication, it has greatly enhanced the relationship that existed between the various ethnic groups we have in Nigeria. Take for example, an Igbo man who has

never been to the Western part of Nigeria nor has any understanding of Yoruba language, will definitely see English language as the best means and only option to express his emotion, thought or whatever information he has when seen in the midst of Yoruba speakers.

Another important area that language has been useful in keeping us together in Nigeria is in the field of academics. This is because it has to a great extent helped to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor, the privileged and the less privileged. However, English remains the link between the high to low class persons in Nigeria and beyond.

In religion, the important role played by language can never be overemphasized. Herein lays another unifying factor, and being championed by language. English language continues to serve as the medium of communication therefore bringing the people of God together under the same umbrella. Many religious gatherings in Nigeria either make use of English language in carrying out their activities side by side little elements of local language(s). This has contributed significantly to the peaceful co-existence in our beloved country. We have had various religious disputes and conflicts at one time or the other due to the fact that such religions do not use English language in its proceedings. This needs to change.

So far, we have pointed out the various roles played by language, (by this we mean English language) in the attainment and sustenance of national unity. However, it is believed that it would have been better if the roles played by English had been played by an indigenous language. This is not intended to discredit English but to emphasize that an indigenous language would have been better, if we are to be a country of one nation, one language.

English and its Mediatory Role in the Multilingual Context like Nigeria

Multilingualism according to Ndimele (2006) is a situation in which two or more languages operate within the same context. Macro factors such as political annexation, marital relationship, economic transaction, cultural association, education acquisition and religious affiliation bring about multilingual society.

The advent of English colonialists and missionaries in the 18th century brought about linguistic imperialism. A situation in which, according to Fanilola (1988), the minds and lives of the speakers of a language are dominated by another language to the point where they believe they can, and should use only the foreign language when it comes to transaction, dealing with the advanced aspects of life such as education, philosophy, literature, government and the administration of justice. When Nigeria attained her political independence in 1960, this had to be sustained for her interest and for unity to be guaranteed as there was no indigenous language that could perform the function of English (as a unifying factor) due to the mutual suspicion of one another, and ethnic consciousness among virtually, all Nigerians. At the height of it all, the truth was revealed about the new state of the nation that no indigenous language was acceptable by all Nigerians. This was captured by Nida and Wonderly (1971).

In Nigeria, there is simply no politically neutral language. In fact, the divisions into three major regions/languages reflect the three poles: Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. The political survival of Nigeria as a country would even be more seriously threatened, that is, if any of these three languages were promoted by the government as being the one national language.

In the face of the multi-linguistic crisis in Nigeria, however, English language played the role of mediation. According to Obuasi (2006), a common language is a mark of identification and a necessary powerful tool for unity and for national consciousness, that is, nationalism. Thus, we need a common language and we should allow English unite us by accepting it. No wonder Adegbite (2004) submitted that English should serve an expected co-ordinary role as a means of inter-ethnic and international communication. Another obvious reason why English should continue to serve as a mediator between the

people of different ethnic languages in Nigeria is because, the youths who are mostly cosmopolitan by birth, with usually mixed identity and who suffer, for no fault of theirs, from this unclear identities in the quest for social mobility vent out their anger at the federal government which is at the center of it all.

Conclusion

The attitude of the government since independence towards language related matters in Nigeria can at best be described as laissez faire. This has a lot of effect on the citizens. Nigeria's history of inter-group relations has not been as violent as it has become in recent times. The violent nature of inter-group relation has heightened language related conflicts in the country. These inter-group and language related conflicts include Tiv in Benue state and Jukun in Taraba state, both from the North-central zone of the country. Efik and Ibibio as recorded in Akwa Ibom and Cross River states, Itsekiri, Urhobo and Ijaw conflict in Delta state, e.t.c. These conflicts have terrifying implications on the nation's stability and have certainly been detrimental to national integration and unity.

In the recent times, the Federal Government under the administration of Muhammadu Buhari is paying lip service to the dangerous havoc being perpetuated by the Fulani herdsmen in the different parts of the country, especially in the North-Central and South-Eastern part of Nigeria. There is need for the federal government to address this issue once and for all by making not just a strong statement against the act but also arresting the situation, to avoid degenerating into further crisis that could lead to disintegration. People in authority should endeavor to make laws and policy actions that would help to foster national unity among members of the Nigerian society.

To conclude this paper, it is pertinent to point out that the relevance of language in national integration and unity cannot be underestimated. The linguistic geography of Nigeria is common knowledge amongst linguists and others who are interested in language. This makes it more of an academic knowledge than general knowledge. In view of this, publicity (both in spoken manner, media houses and stations, printed text and pictures) on the need to unify Nigerians especially youths should be mapped out. There should also be attempts at publicizing the relationships that exist amongst the plethora of languages in Nigeria with a view to establishing a homemade national language that will complement the job of English language in unifying Nigerians. From the assertion made by Yusuf (2012), it is ultimately suggested that English language, continues to play its unifying role for the essentially necessary national integration, while we (the government and policy makers) continue to develop and maintain our local language so as not to destroy the beauty of our natural endowment and heritage. Youths are advised to learn to co-habitat and tolerate one another in Nigeria without minding their cultural backgrounds.

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